Preparedness & Profession: Analysis of Sport Management Alumni Career Trajectories

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When the academic discipline of sport management was developed in the late 1960’s, this came out of the understanding that a unique and evolving industry was in need of professionals who had participated in focused academic training. Fast forward to a post-2000 academic landscape that boasts over 550 sport management programs spread across the globe (North American Society for Sport Management, 2015). While this academic push does reflect the expansive growth and visibility of sport as a significant contributor to the global economy, with a predicted revenue of greater than $145 billion in 2015 (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2015), an ethical gut-check is necessary to determine if we are “doing right” by our students with this continued growth in a saturated marketplace.

There are many opportunities for motivated students to be employed within the sports industry; however, understanding how to best prepare students and helping to facilitate access to these positions should be viewed as crucial elements of the faculty role in undergraduate sport management education (e.g., Jones, Brooke, & Mak, 2008; Stier & Schneider, 2000). Accordingly, faculty members should be focusing on program assessment and the resulting evolution in curricula, so as to meet changing student and industry needs. As such, an assessment of the path that students have taken once they leave our hallowed halls is one step in developing a greater understanding of the role that the academic program does, or does not, play in their development as a (sport) professional.

In the early stages of educational research in sport management, a number of scholars addressed the use of program alumni to direct curriculum design (Ulrich & Parkhouse, 1982), determine career paths (Kjeldsen, 1990), and assess employment status (Parks, 1991). While this line of research has been dormant for some time, recent work has charged academicians to reassess this area of inquiry and re-examine curricula in sport-related programs in order to substantiate the future of sport in academe. Specifically, researchers have indicated the need for further academic, experiential, and professional development, harnessing both internal and external resources to develop a well-rounded academic platform (Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, in press). Legg, Tanner, Timmerman, Dustin, and Arthur-Banning (2015) provide a timely and unique contribution to this area of inquiry, investigating sport management alumni regarding their career choice and program-based preparation. Legg et. al. (2015) found four primary themes, employment status, professional preparation, career satisfaction, and sport in society, that addressed both the current status and program perceptions of sport management alumni. Major findings noted that 63% of the respondents had, at some point, worked in the field of sport management and, of that 63%, 38% were no longer working in the industry. Of note for those exiting the field is their focus on salaries and minimal opportunities. Additionally, 70% of respondents did feel as though their program adequately prepared them for the field; however, those that did not indicate satisfaction in this area specified the need for a greater level of academic competencies beyond those provided in a recreation, parks, and tourism, as the programs included in this study were housed in departments of that nature. Career paths for this group focused on recreation (21%), marketing (18%), and coaching (11%).

It is imperative we continue to investigate how best to serve our students both during their time as undergraduate sport-related majors as well as in their post-graduate endeavors. Accordingly, guided by the aforementioned literature, the purpose of this research is to determine: (a) what career paths former sport management students have followed; (b) whether any defining demographic characteristics have influenced their current status and career trajectory; and (c) how their sport management curriculum prepared them for this path. In other words this exploration begs the question, where are they now and did we help them get there? As such, the goals of this research are both theoretical and practical in nature.

Method and Results

This research is based on qualitative data collection via a 20 question web-based survey which is currently in progress. The request for survey participation was emailed to 742 alumni from one sport management program by
the alumni relations office. The survey will remain open until March 1, 2016 and monthly reminder emails will be sent to program alumni. Ultimately this research will become a longitudinal study with annual survey re-deployment; however, for the purposes of this presentation, the data collected will focus on one year’s participants, their professional status, and perceptions regarding career preparedness. Specifically, we anticipate results and analysis will center on themes related to: (a) an investigation of both sport and non-sport career paths; (b) how various factors (e.g., race, gender, family structure) have impacted these career trajectories; (c) how and in what ways their academic curriculum prepared them for their professional roles since graduation; and (d) recommendations for curriculum modifications to meet industry needs.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

While work has reemerged regarding the “prepared” sport management graduate (e.g., Braunstein-Minkove & DeLuca, 2015; Jones et al., 2008; Stier & Schneider, 2000) from the student’s perspective, this leads to questions regarding the shift that takes place once these individuals have matriculated through our programs and traverse the landscape beyond academe. As such, this research provides a foundation from which academicians can benefit by further examining the importance of overall function of the sport management curriculum. This work will allow us to determine the theoretical implications regarding the direction and preparedness of sport management graduates and the appropriate course of practical action for sport management academicians in order to provide a platform for success. Given this exploration is in its infancy, there will be a need for continued examination of program alumni in a longitudinal manner. Implications, limitations, and future studies will be expanded upon in the presentation.