Diverse Sport Management Environments? Are We Talking the Talk but Not Walking the Walk: An Examination of Disability Sport in the Sport Management Classroom

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The President of the United States in 2013 officially stipulated to schools across the USA to provide students with disabilities equal access to sports (Toppo, 2013). In recent years, a renewed focus has been on sport and recreation opportunities for military veterans with disabilities returning from service deployments (Smith, 2014; Smith & Pitts, 2014). Opportunities for sports, recreation, fitness, and sports tourism for people with disabilities are increasing in number and diversity, and are becoming identified as part of a growing industry in the USA and around the world (Cottingham, Lee, Carroll, Pitts, & Shapiro, 2015; Disabled World, 2015; Shapiro & Pitts, 2014). Disability sport is a growing segment of the sport business industry with viable jobs and careers for graduates of Sport Management. The field of Sport Management is the academic discipline that prepares specially educated individuals to be the sport business professionals who will work in the multi-trillion-dollar sport business industry (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014; Pitts, 2001; Pitts & Stotlar, 2013). Therefore, one might assume that the curriculum of Sport Management is inclusive of all of the job and career possibilities in the massive industry, and thus also includes content about disability sport as a business, a product, and an industry segment. Indeed, the current curriculum standards require diversity in the curriculum to prepare students to work in a “diverse sport management environment” [Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA), 2010]. In regard to disability sport, the words are not found in their documents, but COSMA has a section titled “Diversity in Sport” in which it determines that “…excellence in sport management education includes diversity. Sport management students should be prepared to function effectively in an increasingly diverse sport industry…” and that the academic sport management program “…should ensure that students possess the knowledge, skills, and experiences to understand and deal effectively with diversity in a diverse sport environment” (p. 69).

While research involving people with disabilities in sport is small, specific research involving sport management and disability sport in the sport management literature is miniscule: less than one percent (Shapiro & Pitts, 2014). In offering ways to infuse disability sport into the sport management curriculum, Shapiro, Pitts, Hums, & Calloway (2012) did not conduct research to determine if disability sport was already included in the curriculum in sport management programs. A comprehensive review of the literature also revealed no research was found on this important topic. Thus, it is not known whether disability sport is included in sport management courses. Yet, it is crucial to examine course content in relation to diversity, and specifically for disability sport. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore sport management course content to determine if and how disability sport content is included.

Method

It was determined that the traditional “Introduction to Sport Management” undergraduate course would be the target of this study because it is the course that purports to introduce the student to all of the sport business industry and its jobs and careers. Thus, it would be expected that people with disabilities in sport is included in this course. Instructors of the Introduction course were recruited to complete a 41-item questionnaire to gauge their inclusion of disability sport in the course. Data were collected and analyzed through the university’s Qualtrics system. Given the number of possible items (n=41) only the top 10 topics were analyzed in the present study.

Results

A total of 58 faculty (n=30 males, n=28 females) from institutions of higher education from across the United States completed the survey. For 57 of 58 respondents, the Introduction to Sport Management course was a required undergraduate class at their respective institutions. Of the 41 topics presented to participants the top 10 most commonly reported topics addressed in the introduction to sport management course were Paralympic/Paralympic
Sport (n=27), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (n=45), Special Olympics/Special Olympics World Games (n=22), Facility Accessibility (n=19), Oscar Pistorius (n=13), International Paralympic Committee (n=10), Olympic and Amateur Sports Act (n=11), Program Accessibility (n=11), Inclusion/Integration of disabled athletes (n=11) and Casey Martin (n=12). Of the 58 faculty, nine faculty (16%) indicated they don’t mention disability sport in the class for the following reasons (a) they don’t know enough about it to teach it (n=1), (b) it is not discussed in the textbook (n=4), or (c) it is addressed in other courses (n=2) and two respondents indicated “other” citing other topics as more important to discuss. When mentioning disability sport in other courses, participants reported addressing Casey Martin in Sport Law, the Paralympics and/or Special Olympics in Governance, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in a Title IX course, the ADA in the facilities course and disability sport (warrior games and murderball) in sport and technology. (Other results will be presented.)

Discussion & Implications

While it is surprising to the authors that a high percentage of those who completed the survey included disability sport in the classroom, the authors recognize the likely limitation and bias in the research methodology: It is very likely that upon reading the title of the study those who talk about disability sport chose to complete the online survey resulting in a somewhat biased group of respondents toward disability sport. Faculty who do not discuss this content may have self-selected away from completing this survey. This makes the insights from those who honestly reported not doing so meaningful in understanding the barriers or limitations to including disability sport content into their intro class. It also provides meaningful insights from those who do include this topic. The low percentage of faculty who do not address disability sport in their intro class or who may have self-selected out of the study may support research by Shapiro and Pitts (2014) in which they found less than one percent of 5,443 published papers across 34 sport management journals between 2002 and 2012 were about disability sport. How then, and from what sources do the remaining 84% of faculty get their information to include disability sport into their introduction to sport management curriculum? Some faculty in this study reported they did not include disability sport because their textbook had no content. How faculty address disability sport in their introduction to sport management course speaks in large part to the contexts in which information is available. Respondents primarily relied on lectures, quizzes and film to include disability sport in their course. While we recognize that the final choice for content in the introduction to sport management class is that of the instructors, we hope this study motivates those who currently do not include disability sport to examine the most popular topics reported here and select ones of personal interest or greatest relevance to them for inclusion. Given the growth of disability sport, it is incumbent upon the field to decide to be inclusive, and then to find ways to include disability sport in the literature and classrooms.

References


