An Exploration of a Community of Inquiry in Graduate Online Sports Administration Education

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Online education, while still controversial in some circles, continues to show enrollment growth with 7.1 million students taking at least one online course in 2013 representing a 6.1% increase from 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Nagel (2014) reported that 22 percent (639,343) of graduate students were enrolled in fully online programs while an additional 7.8 percent (227,467) took some courses online in 2012. Within sport management, online graduate programs are now commonplace and many are accredited by COSMA (COSMAweb.org, 2015). Maintaining the relevance and quality of online programs requires consistent evolution based on student needs, technological innovation, and pedagogical best practices.

Community is a term repeated in the literature of digital education. This concept is derived from the traditional liberal arts educational process, but shifts the conceptualization of what constitutes engagement and interaction among students (Conrad, 2005). Theoretical foundations have emerged which work to explain why community experiences in education occur as they do. Benbaun-Fich, Hiltz, and Harasim (2005) developed the online interaction learning model that examines the interplay of four key characteristics: technology, a student, an instructor, and the group of individuals in a class in a process oriented system. By comparison, Rungtusanatham, Ellram, Siferd, & Salik (2004) examined the intersection of content, delivery, and learning levels within an online learning context with program typologies falling within a continuum of variables across these areas. Combining these two theoretical foundations, namely community development and delivery, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) proposed an interconnected theoretical framework, known as the community of inquiry (COI) and grounded it in constructivist theory (Davis & Sumara, 2002) (see also Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Studies that incorporate the three main elements of COI (i.e., social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) are useful to understand the holistic nature of online learning as they address both ideological frameworks and contextual variables (i.e., programmatic nuances).

This study is ongoing and employs a close thematic and rhetorical analysis method grounded in the assessment data gathered for an accredited graduate online sports administration program (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Leff, 1992; ). Data from the graduating classes of 2013, 2014, and 2015 (2016 data will be collected in May 2016 and serve as the final data set prior to analysis) was analyzed preliminarily from qualitative narrative exit feedback while quantitative exit surveys were used for the demographic information.

In determining the contextual variables that exist within the COI, four themes are emerging: academic, culture, faculty, and career. A total of 44 surveys have been reviewed to date. The data is coded with three variables: graduation year, theme set, and textual feedback. This coding allowed for an overall analysis of COI for the program, the ability to determine changes in COI over time, and to determine specific feedback related to theme sets for each cohort.

Ongoing analysis is providing results that show the evolution of an online sports administration graduate program COI through its’ initial years highlighting the use of student feedback in program development. Ultimately, the results will lead to strategic program improvement and program differentiation in the competitive environment of graduate sport management online education.