Sport Management Internships: A Multiple Case Study of Practitioner Perspectives of Communication

Scott Bull, Grand View University

Teaching/Learning - Other (Professional Sport) Thursday, June 1, 2017
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) 8:30 AM
Abstract 2017-005 Room: Wilson

The internship experience is a vital component of the sport management curriculum (Gargone, 2008; Light & Dixon, 2007; Moorman, 2004), which provides students with the opportunity to apply knowledge and theory gained through coursework to practical sport industry settings, while gauging career interest in a particular segment of the sport industry (Hurd & Schlatter, 2007; Schneider & Stier, 2006). While there is widespread agreement on the importance of internships and the need to ensure quality experiential learning for students, there are various expectations for internships and misconceptions exist among stakeholders. The objectives and structure of internships vary significantly among programs, and standards and practices appear to lack consistency (Cuneen, 2004; Beggs, Ross, & Goodwin, 2008; Light & Dixon, 2007).

Internships are educational in nature, and as such, it is important to establish clear academic goals and outcomes to be implemented and evaluated throughout the internship (Case, 2007; Young & Baker, 2004). Communication regarding the expectations of internships is imperative for effective learning experiences to occur, but is currently lacking among the stakeholders involved (Beggs et al., 2008, Cunningham & Sagas, 2004; Fleming & Ferkins, 2005; Martin & Fleming, 2010). Effective communication between all parties involved is the key to eliminating misconceptions regarding specific roles and responsibilities (Case, 2007; Williams, 2004).

Internships are included within sport management curricula because they provide learning opportunities for students beyond the scope of the classroom and help students develop a realistic understanding of the profession (Surujlal & Singh, 2010). These field experiences can be considered classroom extensions, which enable students to gain knowledge relevant to specific industry segments and allow them to participate in the community of sport management professionals, which helps students understand the functions, roles, values and norms of the organization and industry (Cuneen & Sidwell, 2003; Fleming & Eames, 2005; Light & Dixon, 2007). Research regarding students’ perspectives in sport management internships has provided insight into what students are expecting in an internship (Martin & Fleming, 2010; Martin & Leberman, 2005; Stratta, 2004), students’ satisfaction with internships (Yoh & Choi, 2011), the development of coping skills (Surujlal & Singh, 2010), and how the internship affects organizational commitment (Dixon, Cunningham, Sagas, Turner, & Kent, 2006), and career decision making (Odio, Sagas, & Kerwin, 2014).

Practitioners, serving as agency supervisors, hold differing views, expectations, and experience levels relating to internships (Cuneen, 2004). Communication between agency supervisors and internship coordinators varies considerably, but is essential to the success of the internship as agency supervisors will only understand the educational goals of the internship if there is sufficient communication of those goals (Williams, 2004). Details of the expected number and frequency of intern evaluations must also be established and communicated to the intern prior to the internship (Kelley, 2004). Lee and Han (2011) found that interns have not been evaluated by agency supervisors to a large extent and that internships do not appear to be considered a truly educational practice by practitioners. Sibson and Russell (2011) also found a need for better management of how agency supervisors provide assessments of students and their performance to internship coordinators, which underscored the need for improvement in the relationships between the agency supervisors and the university coordinators, and in the communication among all stakeholders. Planning and implementing successful internships requires an integrated approach that relies on common understanding of stakeholder perspectives (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher, & Pretto, 2008). Research that deeply explores practitioners’ perceptions is needed to help establish a common understanding.
The focus of this study was to determine agency supervisors’ expectations of internships and how communication with campus coordinators and students contributes to those expectations. Gaining a better understanding of practitioners’ views by exploring agency supervisors’ perceptions of the communication of expectations for internships is an initial step in the process of determining gaps in communication, and establishing consistent methods of communication among all parties to bridge those gaps. In focusing on the perceptions of practitioners regarding communication of expectations, this study was intended to provide information that may help lead to more effective communication and more positive learning experiences.

The qualitative multiple case study design utilized web-based qualitative surveys sent to agency supervisors with 122 major league professional sport franchises in North America, followed by in-depth interviews with agency supervisors to gain a better understanding of the experience through the descriptions of practitioners. There were 20 surveys completed and interviews were conducted with six participants. Interviews were semi-structured, using interview guides to allow flexibility for follow up questions and probing opportunities (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 2006). Data analysis and interpretation were inductive in nature, seeking themes in the data in an effort to make sense of the descriptions. “In Vivo” (Saldana, 2009, p.74) coding was utilized as a coding method for both stages of inquiry in order to extract indigenous terms from the participants’ words and phrases.

Results indicated that agency supervisors communicate with students regarding internship expectations through the use of job description documents, verbal communication during the interview process, and by conducting orientations. Agency supervisors described minimal contact with campus coordinators and little or no communication with them about expectations. These practitioners described their own understanding of the communication of expectations, including their perceptions of intern expectations, their lack of understanding of coordinator expectations, and the need to manage interns’ expectations.

Findings underscored the need for improvement in the relationships between agency supervisors and university coordinators, and in the overall communication of expectations. Human resource representatives clearly played an active role in the communication of expectations, and in many cases served as liaisons between department supervisors, students, and internship coordinators. This finding revealed what could be considered a fourth stakeholder in the internship experience, sharing communication with students, internship supervisors, and campus coordinators. Interviews focusing only on human resource representatives’ perceptions may offer different results and would be valuable in determining if there are disparities between how they and departmental supervisors view the communication of internship expectations.