Impact of Internship Stimulus Events on Sport Management Student Well-Being

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Internships are an important part of many sport management programs. Literature regarding internships across relevant disciplines (e.g., tourism, sport, business) has commonly focused on the benefits of these experiences, or more recently, concerns around the unmet benefits of placements (Caddell, Mcilwhan, Irving, Smith, & Smith, 2013; Chen & Chen, 2011; Coco, 2000; Cunningham et al., 2005; Kasli & Ilban, 2013; Smith, Smith, & Caddell, 2015). Further, Odio and colleagues have suggested that the events occurring within the internship experience (i.e., stimulus events or shocks) impact how students view the quality of their internship placement in the sport management context (Odio & Kerwin, 2015; Odio, Sagas & Kerwin, 2014). These studies highlight the impact of the internship experience on career choice outcomes, but fail to address the impact of internship-based shocks or stimulus events on student well-being. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the influence of stimulus events within an internship experience on student well-being within a sport management undergraduate program. Specifically, the focus of this research is to determine what impact, if any, stimulus events within an internship have on student well-being. Further, general student internship expectations are recorded prior to the internship, and ratings of how these expectations were met (or unmet) will be examined in relation to student well-being.

Lamers, Westerhof, Bohlmeiher, ten Klooster, and Keyes (2011) highlight that well-being consists of the following three components: emotional well-being (positive or negative affect of student), psychological well-being (functioning well in life), and social well-being (functioning well socially). Given that internships in sport management are designed to prepare students for their industry of choice and are argued to be a necessity for career placement (Chen & Chen, 2011; Coco, 2000; Parveen & Mirza, 2012), it is assumed that students feel pressure to obtain valuable experiences from their placements. Thus, positive or negative experiences would impact all three components of student well-being. To date, research has addressed improper or unmet expectations across tourism and sport (Chen & Chen, 2011; Day, 2012; Surujlal & Serra, 2014; Todd, Magnusen, Andrew, & Lachowetz, 2014). However, scant literature has connected the internship experience to student well-being; an outcome that is increasing relevant across all educational institutions.

This study involves a mixed-methods case study approach. First, pre-post surveys will measure internship expectations (pre), internship experiences (post), career intentions, and well-being. Second, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with students who demonstrate significant changes (positive or negative) between pre-post survey scores. As supported by Creswell (2014), the purpose of the interview is to provide foundational information regarding the stimulus events occurring within internships, and to discern the nature of student well-being in relation to sport management internship experiences. For the purpose of this study, stimulus events are notable or minor occurrences that stimulate the student in a positive or negative manner during their internship. This definition is slightly adapted from Lee and Mitchell’s Unfolding Model of Employee Turnover, in which “shocks” were defined as jarring positive or negative events. Within the current study we rely on Lee and Mitchell’s (1994) citation of Rosse and Miller’s term stimulus event, which is related to less notable events. Within the context of a relatively short term internship, this term was deemed more appropriate.

All pre-internship data will be gathered within two weeks of the start date of the internship, while post-internship data will be obtained within two weeks of students completing their internship placement report. The single case (case) study was chosen because of the longitudinal aspect (i.e., time 1 and time 2), and what Yin (2014) refers to as the “common case” nature. This means that since the research purpose is focusing on an everyday type of situation (internship experience), the single case allows the researcher to attempt to provide insight into a relationship that may exist (Yin, 2014); the relationship being between the internship experience and student well-being. Given the exploration of the connection between these two variables of interest, the single case exploratory nature of this study was deemed relevant. To date, (n = 10) pre-internship surveys (out of N = 19 total interns) were collected in the Fall,
2016 semester, while 20 of a total of 25 surveys will be collected in the Spring/Winter semester of 2017. Each survey participant will be approached for an interview, for a total of N = 30 anticipated interview participants.

Analysis of the pre-post survey data will involve descriptive statistics to summarize and describe the data. Paired sample t-tests will be used to determine if there is a difference between the pre and post-survey mean scores regarding well-being. Additionally, the pre-post survey data will be used to help shape the interview guide. For example, questions related to internship experience and student well-being will be finalized to include a reflection from the participants on why changes may (or may not) have occurred in their ratings. Basic coding will be completed for the interview data to identify themes around the internship experience and well-being, as well as categorize the type and nature of stimulus events discussed within the internships (Yin, 2014).

This research has important implications for not only internships in the sport management context, but internships across disciplines. Administrators who manage interns may find these results useful in developing internship programs that are mutually beneficial for their communities and their interns. Alternatively, findings could lead to assistance in directing student preparation for these placement experiences. Finally, this study contributes to theory as it provides the framework for the conceptual pathway from “stimulus events” occurring during student internships to student well-being. Analyzing the outcome of well-being will provide a beneficial theoretical contribution to the existing literature related to stimulus events (or shocks) within the internship context as it shifts the focus from purely career-related outcomes to include outcomes related to individual psychology. These results will have direct implications for the sport management discipline.