Applying an Experiential Learning Model to Sport Management Internships

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Sport management is an applied field of study where much of the knowledge and experiences needed to be successful after graduation occur both inside and outside of the classroom. Students majoring in the field of sport management need to take advantage of every available opportunity to build their skill sets and their resume to be viable candidates in the current sports job market (Dees & Hall, 2012, p. 71). Moorman (2004) suggested that no single step in a sport management career path is as valuable as an internship.

The growth of curriculum and sport management programs suggests there is a need for an organized and comprehensive model for managing sport management internships. This is important because curriculum and internship requirements vary greatly across programs and there is no universal structure as each school/program is so very different. As such, there is a greater responsibility for all parties involved to ensure that students are experiencing a meaningful internship opportunity through a proposed model of experiential learning.

The proposed model has worth and applied implications for all stakeholders involved and can serve as a blueprint for guided learning experiences (e.g. internships) for future sport management professionals. The model is grounded in Dewey’s experiential learning theory. Dewey believed that education, in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society, must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life experience of some individual (Dewey, 1938, p. 89). Although there are many academic disciplines that attempt to find a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experiences, sport management is a discipline that requires this type of teaching pedagogy (Bower, 2013, p. 31).

The purpose of this presentation is to present an internship model that details each step of the student’s process while incorporating Dewey’s experiential learning theory. Other practical recommendations reflecting the outcomes of previous internship research will be addressed to reflect key stakeholders (university, sport management program, internship coordinator, and on-site supervisor) as all play a pivotal role in determining the ultimate value of the experience. In other words, this presentation will give a step by step breakdown of key stakeholders roles and responsibilities and make suggestions to help improve the internship process.

To create the model, elements of Dewey’s experiential learning theory were divided into four aspects of learning recognized by Bower (2014). The four phases are (1) Strategy (Teacher’s Role, Learners Readiness Experience) – the pre internship seminar class, planning for further experiential learning activities, (2) Participation (Social Environment) – the internship search process, (3) Integration (Knowledge & Content of Organization) – the actual internship, which integrates theory and practice, and (4) Assessment (Learning Outcomes) – the post internship review and reflection.

In the strategy phase, students gain an understanding of the internship pre-requisites and eligibility criteria they need to complete in order to participate in an internship. This includes taking concepts from class lectures, learning activities, observations and reflections, and integrating those into logically sound theories relating to internships and guided learning experiences. One way to accomplish this is by offering a practicum class where the faculty member facilitating the class is the internship coordinator. With their leadership they will be able to mentor and guide students throughout the process. Additionally, in this phase, students become familiar with the mission, purpose, and objectives of the sport management internship.

In the participation phase the students are able to involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in the new experience, which is actively searching for their internship. Students will meet with the internship coordinator and
discuss their area of interest (professional sport, collegiate, youth, etc.), any specialization (marketing, events, programming, etc.), the timing of the internship, and agencies that meet the student’s criterion. It is also the internship coordinators role to help students to be able to surmise substantive responsibilities that are not just mundane and do not contribute to their resume and overall experience, even if they are highly sought after sport internships.

In the integration phase, students are involved with making decisions, solving problems, as well as linking academic knowledge and practical skills to learn and apply to real world situations. Most importantly, the internship experience provides students the learning opportunity to assess whether or not this is the correct career path.

The final stage of the model involves the assessment where students reflect on their internship experiences from many different perspectives. Students have the ability to reflect on their actual internship experience and identify both the personal and professional benefits from completing their sport management internship. For example, after internship completion, students can complete a post internship meeting with the internship coordinator, which can be viewed as a debriefing. The main goal is to evaluate the overall experience and provide an opportunity for students to reflect and share experiences with the internship coordinator and other sport management students. In addition, students can complete a self-evaluation of their internship experience to reflect on their own work and analyze their experiences and the overall influence the internship had on their personal and professional development.

The proposed experiential learning model has important applied pedagogical implications for faculty and staff within sport management and similar fields. The model, while conceptual in nature, does support the creation and implementation of an internship program within a sport management program, as well as supports the work being completed inside and outside of the classroom by faculty. The model also brings awareness for the continued development and revision of internship programs within curricula that can respond to the dynamic nature of the field and academia. As Koo et. al. (2016) stated, sport management program faculty should continue to make efforts to ensure their students are receiving quality experiences that provide them with a realistic representation of the challenges, demands, and rewards that are associated with working in the profession (p. 39).

The applied nature of sport management lends well to the incorporation of experiential learning and more specifically, internships into the curriculum. As Deluca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) noted, students found value in the sport management program requiring internships as part of their graduation requirements. This model allows universities, degree programs, and faculty to continue to meet the demands of the student and field relating to sport management internship practices. It also highlights the need for further investigation into sport management internship best practices and procedures and should be expanded to include all stakeholders and all facets of the internship experience.