Relationship Marketing as a Model to Engage and Retain Online Sport Management Students

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Over the last two decades, traditional brick-and-mortar institutions have been more open to adopt online learning as an academic delivery system (Bakia, Shear, Toyama, & Lasseter, 2012). Among the reasons for this increased growth in online learning is the ability for colleges and universities to grow in enrollment, while also tapping into a previously untapped revenue stream (Martinez & Barnhill, 2017). At the same time, institutions have struggled with concepts such as student persistence and retention (Hart, 2012). While earlier research primarily focused on student retention in the traditional face-to-face setting, a growing area of scholarship explores this relationship with students in online programs (e.g., Beck & Milligan, 2014; Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004).

Researchers (Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Rienties, Beauseart, & Grohnert, 2012; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013) suggest that there are several outcomes of focused student retention programs. Building on two primary models of student retention: Tinto’s (1998) Student Integration model and Bean and Metzner’s (1985) Nontraditional Student Attrition model, scholars suggest that some of the more influential outcomes of student retention include concepts of institutional commitment (Cabrera et al., 1993), social integration (Rienties et al., 2012) and student satisfaction (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). Institutional commitment refers to the student’s commitment to remain at a specific university (Cabrera et al., 1993). Social integration refers to the student’s interaction with the culture of the university, both inside and outside of education (Rienties et al., 2012). Student satisfaction includes not only the learning experience, but also contains aspects of the overall student experience – which includes student support services (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013). Despite the growing interest in student retention in higher education, there is a lack of research regarding the topic in relation to sport management education overall. Retention of sport management students have generally focused on segments of bigger issues regarding mentoring students (Danylchuk, Baker, Pitts, & Zhang, 2015) and quality of sport management programs (Mao & Zhang, 2012). However, there has not yet been research to examine student retention in online sport management education. Thus, this study seeks to fill that gap.

Using marketing-focused concepts of relationship marketing and social exchange theory, the purpose of this study is to examine engagement and retention of online sport management students through measuring student’s perception of relationship quality with the sport management program. Secondly, this study will three subsets of relationship quality including student satisfaction, commitment, and trust as they pertain to online student retention in sport management education.

Using adapted inventory items from Clark, Fine, and Scheuer (2016), data will be collected from current online sport management students during the spring semester from select online sport management programs. Additional students will be recruited from non-sport management programs, in order to provide the researchers with additional segments for comparison purposes.

As previously mentioned, the proposed study seeks to fill the research gap that explores student retention in online programs within sport management education.

Results from the study will be used to provide implications for practice in online sport management education, as well as suggested avenues for future research.