Service Learning and Sport in the Dominican Republic

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Teaching/Learning - Teaching strategies/methods (International Sport)
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At many universities, faculty are encouraged to integrate experiential learning into their course curriculum. Sport management faculty who are members of NASSM are encouraged to be “concerned about the theoretical and applied aspects of management theory and practice specifically related to sport, exercise, dance, and play as these enterprises are pursued by all sectors of the population” (North American Society for Sport Management Purpose & History, n.d., para. 2). At our university, sport management students have the option to take International Sport Management as an elective in their curriculum. In the inaugural offering of the course, the faculty organized a travel experience to the Dominican Republic so interested students could engage in experiential learning and apply theory to practice. The travel experience included a service learning component as well as an opportunity to learn more about sport in an international context.

Throughout the international sport management course, students learned about how politics, economics, education, gender, etc. impact sport in countries throughout the world. In one unit, the focus was specifically on the Dominican Republic. Students read about the country and watched the movie, In the Time of the Butterflies, which illustrates the underground resistance, led by the Mirabal sisters, to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo. The students gained a better understanding about how politics, and particularly the power of one individual and his regime, can limit the educational, professional, and social opportunities of thousands of citizens. The Mirabal sisters were nicknamed “mariposas,” the Spanish word for butterflies. Trujillo learned of their efforts to resist him and he eventually had three of them killed. The Mariposa Center for Girls, where our students engaged in service learning work, was named after the Mirabal sisters.

The Dominican Republic is a developing country with many impoverished communities that struggle with poor maternal health, child mortality, disease, prostitution, and sex tourism. Most citizens are educated through secondary school, but many girls, especially poor girls, do not have employment opportunities after secondary school. The Mariposa Center for Girls was established to provide girls, ages eight to eighteen, the opportunity to learn about health and wellness, enhance their academics, learn additional life skills, and use sport for personal growth and development. The founders and staff at the center hope that by providing young girls these opportunities, the community will see some of their struggles diminish and the cycle of poverty slowed or eliminated. In order to maintain the programming for the girls, the center needs donations and many volunteers.

The faculty organized this experience for students because “service learning resides at the crossroads of youth development and community improvement. Because it focuses equally on student growth and community problem solving, service learning steers real-world education toward projects that promote the public good” (Richardson, 2006, p. 38). The learning objectives for the experience included: a)demonstrate knowledge of the issues, needs, strengths, problems and resources of the Mariposa Center for Girls; b)value personal involvement in community for socially constructive purposes; c)demonstrate cultural competence and confidence in one’s ability to make a difference in an international sport-related setting; d) communicate, collaborate, and negotiate with faculty, classmates, students and staff at the Mariposa Center for Girls; and e) demonstrate the skills needed to plan, organize, lead, and evaluate a sport-related international project.

With the support of funds received from the NASSM Service Learning Grant Program, the faculty and students spent four full days at the center engaging in both physical work as well as forming relationships with the staff employed there and the girls who attend. In addition to the service learning work, the eight students were required to attend a service learning orientation and pre-evaluation before they left campus. While in the Dominican Republic, they were required to write about their experiences in a journal as well as engage in a guided reflection every evening.
after the service work. Upon return, they participated in focus groups and completed a final evaluation of the experience. Additionally, the Mariposa center has a long wish list that includes but is not limited to sports equipment, school supplies and hygiene items that the faculty and students provided to the Mariposa center upon arrival.

After the service learning experience of the trip, students learned about sport in the Dominican Republic through the following planned activities: 1) a discussion with the Director of the International Surfing Association of the Dominican Republic, 2) a visit to Major League Baseball international headquarters in Santo Domingo, 3) game attendance and visit with the players from the Kansas City Royals Academy, 4) a visit to the Olympic training facility for Dominican athletes, 5) a discussion with the Director of the Dominican Republic Volleyball Federation. This experience led to students’ further understanding of sport in an international context and it sparked the idea of working in sport on an international level.

The presentation will focus on the details and process of planning and executing the service learning and sport experience and incorporating it into a course within the sport management curriculum. We will discuss the learning objectives and the next steps with our research on the experience. Finally, we will discuss how funds from the NASSM Service Learning Grant Program supported our efforts in the service learning and sport travel experience.