State of the Field: What are the Zeigler Winners Saying?

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Governance/Policy - Other (Other)  
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)  
Abstract 2018-181  

Friday, June 8, 2018  
10:50 AM  
Room: Acadia C

Cunningham (2013) argued that despite the growing maturity of sport management as a field and an academic discipline that “scholars have not critically examined theory and its place in sport management scholarship” (p. 1). Daft (1995) claimed that the purpose of research is theory development. All research should attempt to develop theory that helps in explaining why a particular phenomenon is occurring. In his Zeigler lecture, Boucher (1996) pleaded for sport scholars to conduct theory-based research, because it is generalizable. Essentially, he argued that research that is not generalizable does not help sport management practitioners make decisions. The lack of theory development in sport management may also be explained by research interests or motivation. In her Zeigler lecture, Parks (1992) observed that sport management scholars were divided into two groups: one group seeks to develop sport-specific theory, and the other is trying to figure out how to sell more tickets to events. Furthermore, the academic-practitioner divide continues to impede theory development in sport management. Chalip (2013) discussed how theory should be based in practice, and practice should be influenced by theory. The fact that many sport management scholars do not have industry partnerships removes them from working with the people and in the spaces where knowledge production and knowledge transfer occur (Irwin & Ryan, 2013).

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss Cunningham’s observation, as well as the notable issues facing sport management scholarship – including theory development – utilizing comments made by Earle F. Zeigler award winners. The Earle F. Zeigler Award is the most prestigious North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) award that is annually bestowed to an individual that has, among other things, made a significant contribution to the field of sport management in terms of scholarship, research, and leadership. The first Zeigler award was presented to Dr. Earle F. Zeigler at the 1989 NASSM Conference in Calgary, Alberta. A total of 28 sport management scholars have received the award, which includes being tasked with giving a lecture, sometimes during a dinner, at the annual NASSM Conference. The majority of Zeigler lectures have centered on the recipient highlighting issues that exist within the field of sport management, though a few have been research-focused.

Pitts (2000) commented that sport management was a new field examining one of the world’s oldest professions. The first NASSM Conference occurred in 1987, which many sport management scholars use as the starting point for sport management. Chelladurai (1991) remarked that the field of sport management developed at a time where the number of sport organizations was increasing, the attractiveness of sport management to students was growing, and the programs ability to get students employed was a key strength. Weese (2001) observed that sport management was trending towards becoming a popular major, and Mahony (2007) reported that sport management was amongst the top 10 requested majors by incoming freshman. Chalip (2005) shared that holding a professorship in sport management, which he called a young field, had its advantages and disadvantages. Faculty had the ability to shape the trajectory of a brand new field, while also combatting feelings of doubt regarding the uniqueness of sport. In reference to Cunningham’s critique of the lack of theory development in sport management, it is important to consider that the field started in the late 1980s and both Chalip (2005) and Zhang (2014) referred to the field as being young in their Zeigler addresses. Whether or not a field that is 30 years old should be considered young is debatable, but the fact that some consider it to still be a young field may speak to the lack of theory development in sport management. Conversely, it could be argued that sport management is viewed as a young field due to the lack of sport-specific theory development.

If sport management is a young field, then the growing pains and/or challenges the field has experienced would still have an influence on modern sport management programs and research. A thorough review of past Zeigler lectures, which primarily discuss the state of the field, reveals that sport management has encountered curriculum, faculty, and research challenges. These issues likely influence the lack of theory development in sport management. This presentation includes a content analysis (Elo et al., 2014) of those three areas – curriculum, faculty, and research – as
well as a discussion of the solutions posed by past Zeigler winners. The three areas were selected a priori, or deductively, as the Zeigler lecturers frequently highlight those as historical issues in their opening remarks.

Elo et al.’s (2014) describe content analysis studies as involving three phases: preparation, organization, and report. The preparation phase consists of collecting suitable data for content analysis, making sense of the data, and selecting the unit of analysis. In deductive content analysis, the organization phase involves categorization matrix development, whereby all the data are reviewed for content and coded for correspondence to or exemplification of the identified categories (Polit & Beck, 2012). In the reporting phase, results are described by the content of the categories describing the phenomenon using a selected approach.

This study contributes to the sport management literature by amalgamating the comments of previous Zeigler winners to discuss the frequently discussed (see 2013 review articles in Sport Management Review discussing “Theory and Theory Development in Sport Management”) lack of theory development in the field of sport management. Additionally, the findings have the potential to be used for discussion in graduate level sport management seminar courses that examine the evolution of sport management as an academic discipline, current challenges, and future directions for the field.