The Current State of Diversity Inclusion in the University Classroom: A Survey of Sport Management Faculty Members

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Curricular diversity can take many forms. For example, Gurin (1999) defined the term classroom diversity as the extent to which knowledge and issues about diverse groups are included in courses. Beyond course content, Nelson Laird (2011) stated that diversity can also be included in the way a course is designed, such as through professors’ efforts to vary their teaching methods, to empower students through class participation, and by adjusting of aspects of the course based on students’ specific learning needs.

The inclusion of diversity in its many forms, such as those described above, in university curriculum is linked to numerous positive student outcomes. In a study focused on 4,403 college students from nine public U.S. universities, Hurtado (2005) found that the students who were enrolled in a diversified curriculum scored significantly higher in areas such as complex thinking skills, retention, cultural awareness, interest in social issues, the importance of creating social awareness, and support for institutional diversity initiatives. Additionally, Brooks, Harrison, Norris, and Norwood (2013) explained that increased diversity in curriculum can assist students in learning how to perceive problems and issues from multiple perspectives, in reducing misleading and harmful stereotypes of different groups in society, in improving communication and encouraging cooperation, and reducing beliefs that one’s own cultural group is superior to other cultural groups. Including topics of diversity in the classroom also helps prepare students for living and working in an increasingly diverse world (Sciame-Giesecke, Roden, & Parkison, 2009). Beyond the benefits of diversity in curriculum, recent research has also called attention to the need for diversity to be infused into course content over a broad range of courses, as opposed to having specific courses focused on a diversity topic like gender or race (Nelson Laird, 2010).

Despite the overwhelmingly positive benefits of diverse curricula in universities, a national survey of university professors in the United States found that 60% did not incorporate issues of diversity into their courses (Nelson Laird, 2011). A follow-up study found that those professors who included diversity in their courses were more likely to encourage peer interactions within the classroom, emphasize deep approaches to learning, use active classroom techniques, interact with their students, and promote learning outcomes such as intellectual and practical skills and personal and social responsibility (Nelson Laird, 2014). These findings further solidify the argument that diversity in the classroom results in positive outcomes for students.

Within the sport management discipline, there is a wealth of literature relating to diversity in the workplace (e.g., Cunningham’s body of work), but very little in terms of the inclusion of diversity in the sport management classroom. Those scholars who have published on this topic did so focusing on one area of diversity. For example, DeSensi (1995) examined models of intercultural sensitivity and organizational stages of multiculturalism in the context of physical education and sport and called for curricular change in these disciplines that would provide a greater focus on intercultural relations and social action. Citing the fact that at least 15% of the world’s population has some form of a disability, Shapiro, Pitts, Hums, and Calloway (2012) provided recommendations for sport management programs to infuse topics and issues of disability into curriculum. In an article describing a post-structural feminist framework for gender equity, Shaw and Frisby (2006) noted that in sport management, gender is often taught in stand-alone courses “as though diversity issues occur outside other areas such as marketing, finance, sponsorship, strategic management, and policy making” (p. 504). Similarly, Fink & Pastore (1999) touched on the lack of proactive diversity management efforts within sport management education.

While the aforementioned studies all identified the lack of diversity in sport management curricula and called for greater inclusion, none assessed faculty’s perspectives on the issue. Doing so could reveal to what extent sport
management faculty value diversity and attempt to include it in their course content and course design. Therefore, given the dearth of literature on this topic within the sport management discipline and the well-documented positive outcomes of diverse curricula, the purpose of this study was twofold: first, to examine the extent to which current university sport management faculty include diversity within their teaching and their courses, and second, to assess sport management faculty members’ perceptions on diversity in curriculum. Using the two forms of diversity inclusion described in the opening paragraph of this abstract (course content and course design), an online survey was developed consisting of: 1) Nelson Laird’s (2011) Diversity Inclusivity Model; 2) questions regarding the extent to which faculty include different types of diversity content in their courses; 3) open-ended questions assessing faculty members’ perceptions of diversity and including it in their courses; and 4) demographic questions.

The survey was distributed via a link sent to members of the Sport Management Listserv in October 2017, and a total of 116 university faculty members completed the survey. In terms of course content, independent samples t-tests revealed that both female faculty members and faculty members of color reported statistically significant greater inclusion of topics involving women’s sport, race and ethnicity in sport, and sexual orientation and sport in their courses than male faculty members and white faculty members. No significant differences existed between groups in terms of the inclusion of topics involving disability sport, international sport, or multiple cultures. As for course design, faculty members of color scored significantly higher than their white peers, and female faculty members scored significantly higher than their male colleagues in several categories from Nelson Laird’s (2011) Diversity Inclusion Model. For example, faculty of color scored significantly higher than white faculty in the following categories: “students develop skills necessary to work effectively with people from various cultural backgrounds”, “the course content emphasizes contributions to the field by people from multiple cultures”, “you explore your own cultural and intellectual limitations as part of class preparation”, “you vary your teaching methods to encourage the active participation of all students”, and “you try to empower students through their class participation”. Meanwhile, female faculty members scored significantly higher than males on “you explore your own cultural and intellectual limitations as part of class preparation”, “you try to learn about student characteristics in order to improve class instruction”, “you vary your teaching methods to encourage the active participation of all students”, “you work on creating a classroom atmosphere that is conducive to student learning”, among others. Initial data analysis on the open-ended response questions revealed a variety of themes regarding faculty members’ perceived benefits of including diversity in their courses, as well as common challenges. One major theme that emerged was the feeling that more guidance and assistance are needed within our field to help faculty members include more diversity in their teaching. Additional detailed findings will be presented, including a discussion of the study’s implications.