Faculty Perceptions of Online Learning in Undergraduate Sport Management Programs

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Online education is growing at a remarkable rate and universities and programs are adopting this form of delivery to meet the ever-changing demands of students and faculty. According to the Online Learning Consortium, in 2015, “the number of students, taking online courses grew to 5.8 million nationally, continuing a growth trend that has been consistent for 13 years”. In addition, more than a quarter (28%) of higher education students are enrolled in at least one online course. When chief academic leaders were polled on the topic of online learning being crucial to their long-term strategy, the percentage fell from 70.8% in 2014 to 63.3% in 2015. The report attributes the shift is coming from very small universities who no longer aspire to add online courses or programs. Still, 71.4% did rate that learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those in face-to-face instruction. There also remains questions regarding the effectiveness and delivery of online courses as only 29.1% of academic leaders reported that their faculty accept the “value and legitimacy of online education” (Online Learning Consortium, 2017).

Online delivery provides flexibility with regard to when students can take courses, as well as alleviate demands on in-person course instruction. As Harden (2013) suggested, “the college classroom is about to go virtual” (p. 56). Traditional public research universities use online learning more than liberal arts colleges and non-for-profit universities (Smith, 2016 p. 68) with the greatest use at for-profit institutions (McPherson & Bacow, 2015).

Students are becoming more comfortable with online learning, and the demand for online courses/programs is increasing (Smith, 2016 p. 68). Traditional college aged students have grown up conducting a significant part of their social lives online (Smith, 2016 p. 68). These students are very comfortable with technology and are prepared to interact with their professors and classmates in ways previous students did not. Smith (2016) suggested the traditional model of higher education is increasingly rare. Harden (2013) stated, “non-traditional students make up 40 percent of all college students,” showing “that the traditional residential experience is something that many students either can’t afford” (p. 61) or do not want. By offering online courses/programs, institutions will be able to increase their student population by enrolling students who are unable to come to campus for a traditional college experience.

Sport management is an applied field of study with many hands on learning opportunities. In addition, networking in the field is crucial to finding successful job placement. Due to its applied nature and job competition, the researchers wanted to investigate sport management faculty perceptions of undergraduate online learning within the curriculum. Specifically, what courses are best suited to be taught online compared to face-to-face. A survey, which consisted of four sections (demographics, faculty perceptions, course suitability, and 1 open ended question), was constructed for the project. Faculty perceptions and course suitability were measured using a 6 point Likert scale. Participants were sent an email that described the purpose of the study and online survey link. Researchers were granted access to utilize the NASSM list serve as well as the Women in NASSM (WIN) list serve to distribute the survey. Eighty-nine participants took part in the study and completed the online survey.

Faculty were primarily males (52%), employed full-time (98%), tenured (45%), and had been teaching in higher education for 6-15 years (54%). In terms of online teaching, 61% have taught online with the majority (38%) teaching 1-2 courses. In regards to the number of online courses offered in each sport management program, the majority (33%) do not offer online courses.

When considering faculty perceptions of online sport management programs, an overwhelming amount (78%) either
strongly disagreed (39%), disagreed (22%) or somewhat disagreed (17%) that completely online undergraduate sport management programs offer the same quality of education as those who offer face-to-face programs. Faculty had similar views on student’s being prepared to enter the workforce if they complete their sport management program totally online as 83% either strongly disagreed (33%), disagreed (31%) or somewhat disagreed (19%).

The results from online course suitability follow faculty perceptions that within the undergraduate sport management curriculum, face-to-face options are more appropriate than online options. In all 11 courses listed (COSMA recommended curriculum), the percentage of faculty who strongly disagreed or disagreed was higher than those who strongly agreed or agreed that online delivery was appropriate in an undergraduate sport management program. Out of the eleven courses, faculty believed event/operations and facility management were the least appropriate for online delivery while introduction to sport management and sociology/psychology were the best suited for online learning.

In addition to the quantitative data collected, the researchers extrapolated some themes from the final question of the survey that asked for their thoughts on online learning in an undergraduate sport management program. One of the most prevalent themes to come from the research question deals with online vs. face-to-face instruction. Participants of the current study state that online education is acceptable, but face-to-face instruction is needed to produce students who can be successful in the very competitive field of sport management.

Despite the growth in online learning, sport management faculty have reservations about this form of delivery in an undergraduate program. This presentation will highlight other key findings and offer insight into quality online learning in sport management.