How Rigorous are Sport Management Courses? An Evaluation Relative to Class Level, Course Grades, and Student Ratings

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While academic rigor has always been central to the academy (Graham & Essex, 2001), it has garnered more attention in the past few decades due in part to the growing criticism of higher education. The American model of higher education routinely is attacked for its declining standards, grade inflation, and lack of incentives to encourage challenging work. Books like Academically Adrift (Arum & Roksa, 2011), The Five Year Party (Brandon, 2010), and Bad Students, Not Bad Schools (Weissberg, 2010), as well as critical research (Collier, 2013; Jacobs & Colvin, 2009; Snider, 2009), give credence to these attacks by arguing that students are generally more interested in the social endeavors of college rather than academic pursuits. Confounding an examination of academic rigor is the difficulty in defining and evaluating rigor, a challenge acknowledged by Draeger, del Prado Hill, Hunter, and Mahler (2013) who suggested in their study of faculty that they “know it [rigor] when they see it”, but few felt confident in their ability to define it” (p. 269). Regarding sport management, several Earle F. Zeigler Lecture Award winners have offered critiques of the discipline’s curriculum (Boucher, 1996; Cuneen, 2003; James, 2017; Zeigler, 1989). Additionally, Newman (2014) addressed his concerns of the rigor and quality of our curriculum in the neoliberal era.

Thus, the purpose of this presentation is twofold. First, results of a three-year study to define and measure course rigor in a sport management curriculum will be presented. The discussion will include: 1) the creation of a course rigor operational definition and corresponding questions – which include explanations of the basic tenants of rigor identified as critical thinking, challenge, mastering complex material, time and labor intensity, and quality work; 2) results of a confirmatory factor analysis indicating a clear one-factor solution for the rigor definition; 3) the delivery of rigor questions through existing student ratings; 4) correlations among rigor, instructor ratings, course ratings, course grades, and enrollment; 5) an ANOVA comparing rigor across class levels; and 6) a least squares multiple regression to determine variables that predicted course rigor.

Second, the implications of the findings relative to teaching quality will be presented. For example, one of the more noteworthy findings was the lack of correlation between rigor and course grades. This finding refutes the theory of retributitional bias (Gigliotti & Buchtel, 1990), which is the belief that students provide higher ratings for professors who provide easy courses. Practically, this finding reinforces that students appreciate course rigor and faculty should strive to challenge students and avoid grade inflation without fear of low student ratings. Furthermore, rigor was predicted by overall student ratings, which indicates that students’ conceptualizations of rigor coincide with their overall impressions of a course. In aggregate, these results contribute to the larger body of research connected to rigor, student ratings, and sport management education because it is the first of its kind to define and evaluate rigor in sport management. Additional findings, pragmatic teaching suggestions to encourage rigor, and ideas for future research will conclude the presentation.