A Qualitative Analysis of Students’ Sport Management Service Learning Perceptions

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Service learning is a key component of academic curricula across the nation, and sport management programs are no exception. With a goal of positively impacting students through hands-on learning and experiences, service learning allows traditional course content to be applied in real world settings. By providing students with learning experiences not afforded in a typical classroom setting, students should experience positive outcomes such as increases in learning (Madsen & Turnbull, 2006), enhanced sensitivity of community social good (Rhoads, 1998), and improved problem solving and critical thinking skills (Johnson, 1995; Mattson & Shea, 1997; Sutton, 1989). As a means to fully maximize the purported benefits of service learning, it is imperative to understand student perceptions of their service learning experiences through rich, detailed, data collection and analysis. It is here where qualitative methodology may offer the greatest insight.

The purpose of the current study is to identify and better understand participants’ perceptions of sport management service learning. The study is a component of a larger, ongoing longitudinal study which began in 2005. Initially, data were collected using quantitative methodology only. In 2012 the researchers integrated qualitative data collection using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological approaches are concerned with the investigation of situations (phenomena) and the way individuals give meaning to them (Creswell, 2012).

Current participants in the qualitative study total 1,234 undergraduate students (627 male, 607 female, M age = 22.0, SD = 3.48 yrs.) enrolled in sport management and physical education classes at a University in the Southeastern United States, with an expectation of an additional 200-300 subject responses to be included in the analysis by the end of the fall semester, 2018. Participants, past and future, are aware of the purpose of the study and are assigned to various service learning sport events. Site placement ranges each semester from local 5K running events, community sport tournaments and matches, to NCAA Division I Championship events. Upon completion of the service learning event, students complete the qualitative survey which consists of nine open-ended questions. Participants’ responses to the survey questions provide insight into their feelings, thoughts, and actions associated with their service learning event(s). Likewise, participants are asked to identify and give feedback on the application of class content they believe is used while engaging in service learning. Survey questions were developed by the researchers and then reviewed by three experts in the field to enhance trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

The researchers will independently analyze the survey responses, coding all data. Next, initial independent codes will be compared leading to more focused coding allowing for themes to be formed (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2013). Study findings are expected to contribute to broader understanding of service learning initiatives in sport management. Student perceptions, once identified, will assist sport management faculty in determining the efficacy of a variety of service learning initiatives. In addition, future students’ will benefit as programmatic changes may be implemented to enhance the overall service learning experience.