Getting Athletics into the Sustainability Game: A Self-Ethnographic Reflection of the Fruits and Experiences of Experiential Learning

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Previous researchers have explored the value of experiential learning as a means rather than an end (Light & Dixon, 2007). Sport management instructors and their students have the ability to use such opportunities of experiential learning to promote positive change through their interaction and work within the sport sector (Bruening et al., 2015). These opportunities can come through intentional experiential learning, (i.e., the learning through reflection on real-world and applied work experience; Dees & Hall, 2012; Southall et al., 2003), or, similarly related, service learning (i.e., community service component with designed reflection opportunities; Bringle & Batch, 1996) into the course design. Through previous examination, these opportunities provide students with deeper learning experiences, increased confidence, and a better awareness of social problems within sport (Barth et al., 2014; Bennett et al., 2003). Despite the increased offerings of these opportunities in sport management curricula, there are few offerings of courses focused on the business of sport and its relation to and its impact on the natural environment (see Mercado & Grady, 2017). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to present the experiences of student learning of integrating environmental sustainability into the sport sector, the value that this type of experiential learning has to promote positive change, new knowledge, and improved course design.

A reflective and collaborative self-ethnography (see Kerwin & Hoeber, 2015) is currently still in progress. This methodology was chosen to reflect on the student’s experiences as part of a yearlong series of experiential learning assignments incorporating environmental sustainability into a specific collegiate athletic department. The presentation will further discuss the process to decide on this specific methodology. However, data were collected throughout the student’s educational experience primarily through the student’s personal experiences engaging with various stakeholders to integrate environmental sustainability into a college athletic department and through weekly one-on-one conversations between the student and the instructor. Further, upon completion of the year-long assignment, both the student and instructor reflected upon their experiences in order to use this heightened reflexive practice to enhance the professional preparation of the student and improve the educational experiential learning aspect of the curriculum.

From this examination, this presentation will further discuss three areas of value to the sport management academy. First, the methodology used in this study builds upon the calls from Kerwin and Hoeber (2015) to use a collective self-ethnographic methodology to reflect upon our own interactions with sport and to further develop richer theory specific to sport. To that end, the second benefit we will discuss further explores the value and importance of reflection of experiential learning from both a student and instructor’s perspective and advance our understanding of integrating environmental sustainability into sport management lesson plans, courses, and curricula (Mercado & Grady, 2017). Third, through the collective reflection of this experiential learning exercise can build upon previous research exploring the process of integrating environmental sustainability into collegiate athletics through green teams (Casper et al., 2014, 2017; Martin et al., 2015; McCullough, 2013; McCullough et al., 2018; Pfahl et al., 2014).