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Reflective practice

## Sport management internships: Recommendations for improving upon experiential learning



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### ABSTRACT

An internship is a major component of many sport management programs and appears to provide a competitive edge to students seeking employment in the field of sport management. This paper applies Dewey's experiential learning theory to a discussion of how this approach to learning can be incorporated in a sport management internship program. Furthermore, this paper delineates key stakeholders' roles and responsibilities, makes recommendations to help improve the internship process, and can serve as a blueprint for developing and administering guided-learning experiences (e.g., internships) for sport management professionals.

### 1. Introduction

Sport management is an applied field of study in which the knowledge and expertise needed to be successful is acquired both inside and outside of the classroom. The more opportunities students have to immerse themselves in practical and applied sport management experiences before graduation, the greater the likelihood they will be attractive to potential employers in the competitive field of sport management. In order to graduate sport management majors who will be competitive in the marketplace, educators must foster opportunities for them to participate in applied learning or experiential learning opportunities, primarily in the form of internships (Lee, Kane, Gregg, & Cavanaugh, 2016, p. 116). The significance of applied learning is illuminated by Moorman (2004), who suggests that no single step in the sport management career path is as valuable as an internship.

Internships have become the *modus operandi* for most professional preparation programs in sport management in the United States and abroad, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Stier & Schneider, 2000). In the United States, 86% of sport management programs have mandatory internship credits incorporated into their curriculum, and 77% of sport management programs at the bachelor's, master's, or doctoral level have an experiential learning requirement (Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008; Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011). Additionally, an examination of sport management curriculum (Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011) revealed that internships were the most common curricular component in sport management programs. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2016) Job Outlook Survey, relevant work experience continues to be an important consideration among employers when interviewing college graduates. Of those employers surveyed, 64.5% prefer to hire candidates with relevant work experience, and of those, 56% favor candidates who have acquired experience through an internship/co-op.

Furthermore, the *Sport Business Journal* surveyed more than 2000 senior-level sport industry executives (in both professional and college sports) regarding the curricular requirements of sport management programs. Specifically, this survey found that executives in the sport industry rank the internship experience as the most valuable requirement (51%) of sport management programs, and they consider the internship essential to the success of a sport management program. In addition, seventy-four percent of the sport

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executives reported that internships/extracurricular activities carried the most weight when they evaluated entry-level candidates on paper (*Sport Business Journal*, 2015). Thus, relevant research demonstrates the importance of internships in establishing the credibility of the sports management program and in providing graduates with benefits that make them desirable to potential employers in the field.

The purpose of this paper is to (1) provide an overview of the pertinent internship literature relative to sport management internships and experiential learning and (2) provide suggestions for enhancing the sport management internship. The recommendations for improving the internship process are, in part, grounded in Dewey's experiential learning theory, which contends that "education must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life experience of some individual" (Dewey, 1938, p. 89).

## 2. Experiential learning

Experiential learning, such as field experiences (i.e., internships and practicums), has long functioned as a principal constituent of sport management education (Bennett, Henson, & Drane, 2003), although the literature provides various definitions and explanations of experiential learning. According to Kros and Watson (2004), experiential learning is a "process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 283). Conley (2008) suggests that experiential learning involves students discovering, processing, and applying information and subsequently reflecting upon what they have done. Brzovic and Matz (2009) argue that engaging students academically, socially, and emotionally is the primary thrust of experiential learning, while Foster and Dollar (2010) state that experiential learning occurs when an individual is "working or volunteering for an organization in order to gain on the job experience in their preferred field of work before graduation from an academic program" (p. 10).

The Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) considers experiential learning vital to professional development (COSMA, 2016; Pierce & Petersen, 2015). Strategic implementation of sport management field experiences involves the application of scholarship and curricular competences, which is reinforced while preparing students for entry and advancement in the field of sport management (Lee & Lupi, 2010).

The fundamental philosophy of experiential learning is based on John Dewey's theory. Dewey (1938) proposed that the nature of experience is continuous and that the experiential learning process is of fundamental importance. Dewey's educational theory was tremendously influential in the 20th century and remains significant today, as is evidenced by the incorporation of practical experiences into the curriculum of many disciplines. Notably, while many academic disciplines strive for a balance between theoretical knowledge and practical experiences, "sport management is a discipline that requires this type of teaching pedagogy" (Bower, 2013, p. 31).

Dewey's experiential learning model revolves around four phases of education, as cited by Bower (2014): (1) social environment: the relationship among teachers, learners, curriculum, and community; (2) knowledge and content organization: the way learning occurs – students should be placed in learning experiences that allow them to pose and solve problems, make meaning, produce products, and build relationships; (3) learner readiness and experience: preparing for lives as citizens – the experiences must be educative and connect to the real world; and (4) learning outcomes: the student learned – the student needs to have the ability to acquire more knowledge through the experiences than he or she knew prior to the experience.

Applying Dewey's experiential learning theory to sport management internships is a sound approach because it focuses attention on the overall learning process, particularly in the area of learning environments, which is a hallmark of successful sport management internship programs. Dewey (1938) contends that the quality of the experience for the learner is key and that the educator's role is to provide experiences that not only engage students but also influence their future actions.

## 3. Primary stakeholders

When the internship is viewed as a guided learning experience, it becomes evident that the relationship between all stakeholders or contributors is central to the success of the experience. Schoepfer and Dodds (2011) identify six primary contributors to an internship, all of whom play a role in influencing the ultimate value of the experience: (1) the student intern, (2) the internship coordinator, (3) the sport management program, (4) the college or university, (5) the host organization, and (6) the on-site supervisor. For simplicity, the contributors are grouped to form three primary stakeholders within the internship experience: (1) the student; (2) the university, sport management program, and internship coordinator; and (3) the host organization and on-site supervisor. The on-site supervisor and student, with the assistance of the internship coordinator, should cooperate in planning a comprehensive practical experience that meets the educational needs of the student.

### 3.1. The student

The internship is a course of study with both an experiential and academic component. Each stakeholder derives specific benefits from the internship experience, most importantly the student who is working for the internship agency to earn academic credit (Odio, Sagas, & Kerwin, 2014). While the internship agency and the university receive some benefits from the student's internship, typically it is the student who reaps the greatest rewards as he or she has opportunities to network with professionals, acquire and refine skills, bridge the gap between theory and practice, and discover whether sport management is the appropriate career path.

Recent research has revealed that undergraduate sport management students perceive and rate their experiential learning experiences (i.e., internship and practicum) to be the most beneficial components of the curriculum over their four years (Goldfine, 2017). This research study examined data gathered over a six-year period using a 5-point Likert Scale, with 1 being the least

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