Preparing Students for the Sport Management Industry

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Abstract: The sport industry is progressively growing, valued at $2.65 trillion (Anani, 2024). This type of industry growth has prompted an increase for professionals in the field with skills to meet this demand. Consequently, there has been a surge in academic programs in sport management especially in the U.S. The first graduate program in Sport Management commenced in 1966 at Ohio University (Parkhouse, 1996) and now there are over 400 programs in the U.S. (NASSM, 2021). Sport management programs have expanded to many countries in Europe, Asia and Australia (NASSM, 2021). Sport plays a major role in many different societies around the world. People who decide to study sport must be able to embrace its global outreach and its increasing power to transform lives. As the field of sport management continues to evolve, it is imperative for educators to prepare future professionals for a growing global industry.

This paper highlights the unique projects constructed by sport management professors for students to develop professional skills and prepare them for the job market. The projects include Esports production/collaboration, National Basketball Association rural development marketing plan, and research participation project (focusing on coaching perception). All projects were designed to build the quintessential skills in sport management. In addition, the projects involved higher levels of student engagement, critical thinking, and technology usage and have garnered high student satisfaction.

Keywords: Sport Management, Student Preparation

Professional development is a key component in preparing all students for successful matriculation into their careers. Many universities incorporate professional development in their university and program level outcomes. It is the specific professional development skills that allow universities to demonstrate the success of their graduates. Previous research suggest students should become more aware of career opportunities through the exploration of their field's professional community and by developing professional social skills prior to graduation (Flaherty, Day, Urbanek, D'acunto, Quinn, & Zollner, 2019; Alanson, & Robles, 2016).

This paper highlights three instructors who incorporated specific activities within their courses for students to develop professional skills in order to prepare them for work in the sport industry. This includes specified formal coursework centering on the required skills in sport management, informal educational opportunities nestled in practitioner based learning, and research initiatives that are collaborative and comprehensive.

Sport Management

Professional development skills can be general as in building skills that allow one to succeed at work, and/or academic discipline specific. The sport industry as suggested by the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) lists key elements for undergraduate students majoring in sport management referred to as the Common Professional Component (CPC) (COSMA, 2016). The key elements include incorporating a foundation of sport (historical and sociological) and foundations of sport management, i.e. management, governance, etc. (COSMA, 2016). Additional elements include the function of sport management, the sport management environment and career preparation that adds an integrative experience approach, and career planning (COSMA, 2016). COSMA postulates that sport management academic programs should effectively link classroom with the sport management industry (COSMA, 2016). This linkage provides relevancy for the programs.

The academic discipline of sport management is fast increasing amongst universities globally. This increase will demand professionals who not only have theoretical knowledge, but also practical experience in areas as outlined by COSMA. As many students are steadily declaring sport management as a major, university faculty members must meet this demand to ensure students are well prepared to enter the field. Thus, faculty members must develop best practices to support the overall development of students. Faculty members must make the proper connection of theory to practice, encourage career exploration and planning which can lead to a more purposeful professional path for students.

Theoretical Framework

The theories that were used in the courses to prepare students for the evolving field of sport management were constructivism and the Theory of Collaborative Learning. Regarding the constructivism learning theory, one instructor focused on allowing students to build on prior knowledge, both from prior courses and from life experiences. Building upon prior knowledge, combined with new terminology permits the student to develop practical projects that further transmitted the information to long-term memory. Regarding the Theory of Collaborative Learning, students are able to build knowledge in conjunction with desirable learning outcomes (Navot, 2014). These learning outcomes include critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, communication, shared responsibility, along with appreciation and consideration for their peers (Navot, 2014).

Project 1: Practical Skills with a Sport Organization (NBA Rural Marketing Research Plan) Students enrolled in a Sport Marketing course had the opportunity to develop a marketing research plan for the National Basketball Association (NBA). Students had to demonstrate an understanding of marketing and organizational skills through implementation of current practices into sport-related business situations. Thus, the course project focused on investigating rural Americans having access to the professional sports experience of the NBA. For the scope of this project, the NBA experience included game day attendance, employment opportunities, and developing a pipeline of recruitment for professional athletes. The students utilized prior knowledge from courses such as Introduction to Sport Management and were introduced to new knowledge (the five P's of sport marketing). By concentrating on rural Americans for the project scope, many students were able to draw from life experiences having lived in a rural town, having family members of rural towns or a basic understanding of the sociocultural and geographical dynamics of rural towns. The combination of prior knowledge, new knowledge and life experiences aligned with the theory of constructivism. Based upon the course evaluation and student learning outcomes, the students gained hands on learning of real life situations in building a marketing research plan. The students interacted with an NBA representative monthly and received up to date feedback based upon the NBA's overall mission, and project goals.

Initially the students appeared nervous interacting with the NBA representative, as most of them had not had prior contact with a sport professional at that level added with the intensity of the project. Over time, students built professionals kills in communication (presenting), teamwork, organizational leadership and behavior. The students reported a better understanding of the sport management environment and increased preparation of a career in sports.

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Project 2: Career Exploration with Esports Esports (electronic sports) has grown exponentially within the past five years. In fact, Newzoo (2019), reported growth from 135 million in 2015 to 454 million in 2019 in participation. Esports may be new to the gaming industry; however, it is gaining momentum and garnering professional gamers rapidly. With this boom in popularity, it is important for faculty members to prepare sport management students for this new edition to the sports industry.

One professor has committed to preparing students to develop skills in managing Esports. The professor first developed a grant proposal to seek funds for establishing an Esports lab. The lab was designed to provide a comprehensive learning experience with state of the art technological platform for sport management students. The professor developed a learning center to build skills in communication, research, critical thinking, and multitasking. Primary skills also included event management and on-screen skill development.

The professor was awarded the grant and the Esports lab although in its infancy stage has already garnered mass student support and interest in gaming. Workshops have been held for students and faculty members. Course projects have been designed for student preparation in the new gaming phenomenon. This type of project focuses on career development and exploration as it gives the students a visual of the future within the field. Students are able to carve out a niche that is trending and opportunity to serve as leaders as it continues to grow.

Project 3: Connection of Theory to Practice with Research Project

Research is an important skill for students majoring in sport management. For many professors, research is embedded within a course, whereas some professors will list it as a standalone project. Research expands the knowledge of sport management students outside of the classroom. Research promotes critical thinking skills along with analytical and communication skills. Students are able to explore their interests within the field; in addition to networking with other scholars.

Research does require guidance through the scientific steps. Thus, one professor has consistently provided research opportunities for students in sport management. The professor establishes one research project annually in which he serves as the lead researcher and students work alongside through completion. What makes this research process unique is that the research topics typically include coaching and student-athlete perceptions. Many of the students are current or former student-athletes and are invested in the research process due to personal experiences. The research gives them a different perspective from the coaching standpoint. Students report having a newfound respect for the coaching discipline. Regarding research concerning the student-athlete perception, the students gain an in-depth view of student behavior and performance. This type of research prepares students who seek coaching as a profession and those students who want careers within sport leagues. Students learn how best to serve either student athletes or professional players.

The results of this process serves as a foundation for the understanding the research process and encourages students to continue their own research journey either in graduate school or job in the sport industry that requires research.

Conclusion

Academicians in sport management are always searching for opportunities to build the skills of their students and prepare them for the growing sport industry. This paper highlighted three ways in which professors were able to develop skills for careers. The overall goal is to optimize learning, while creating a fun environment. The aforementioned projects gave students an in-depth look into their field of study with practical experience.

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