
The Digital Divide and the Global Pandemic: Historically Black College and University Sport Management Classrooms Transitioning to Distance Learning

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Abstract: The global pandemic has impacted education significantly on all levels for administrators, educators, and students. Programs in higher education have faced the greatest impact in part due to the financial implications related to the learning environment on this level. Questions connected to the cost of tuition, collegiate sports, and the overall economic sustainability of colleges and universities during the pandemic remain a point of conversation for educators. The purpose of this theoretical article is to examine the challenges that sport management faculty members are experiencing in online instruction at historically black colleges and universities. Furthermore, tactics related to mitigating the challenges experienced in this environment are identified. Examples of learning activities that promote student engagement in sport management virtual classrooms are presented. The recommendations of supporting educators with faculty development, exploring options of furnishing devices, and utilizing electronic learning resources and applications are offered as solutions to the challenges related to the transition to distance learning during the pandemic.

The recent COVID-19 global pandemic has impacted education significantly on all levels. It can be argued that higher education has faced the greatest impact due to the financial implications such as tuition, collegiate sports, and the overall economic sustainability of colleges and universities (Toldson, Price, & Gasman, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines of practicing social distancing, using protective wear, and rigorous cleaning protocols as well as the increase in the number of cases in the United States has caused industries to modify the way that they do business. In education, modifications include shifting to other forms of instruction. As a result of the high risk of infection in areas where large groups gather, many institutions have transitioned to hybrid or fully online teaching on the collegiate level (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

However, one of the major areas that this adjustment has impacted for educators in the field of sport management is instruction method. More specifically how sport management professors deliver information to students in a manner that promotes inclusion and allows the learners to engage in interactive educational activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This issue is significant to educators in this field because a major influence in sport management is placed on allowing students to apply theoretical content to professional experience through hands-on learning initiatives inside of the classroom (Sutton, 1989; Perry, 2017). Smaller institutions of higher education are greatly affected during this time. These institutions are more likely to move away from face-to-face instruction to avoid risking outbreaks of the disease and other related hazards such as legal liability. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are one segment in higher education that is greatly being impacted. The purpose of this theoretical article is to examine the challenges that sport management educators are experiencing in online instruction at HBCUs and to discuss tactics that can be implemented to overcome these challenges. This essay will also provide examples of learning activities that have been used in this learning environment that promote student engagement.

Obstacles facing HBCU sport management instructors during the Global Pandemic

During the pandemic, like many institutions of higher education, HBCUs experience many factors that ultimately impact teaching and learning. According to Harper (2020) some of the primary concerns include the effect on in-person instruction, access to auxiliary services, and the displacement of students at HBCUs. In the spring semester of 2020, the majority of HBCUs had to close due to the threat of a COVID-19 outbreaks on campus. Due to financial restraints many state funded HBCUs had no choice but to reopen their doors for the fall 2020 semester.

Students and HBCU institutions rely heavily on auxiliary services. Students need auxiliary services for accessing technology, housing, dining, campus security and student health. HBCU's rely on the fees from auxiliary services to pay off debts of the university, help aid in athletic programs, and accreditation purposes. According to Charles and Dobson (2020) HBCUs rely heavily on monies earned when students are on-campus and the loss of those fees can impact the sustainability of sports programs, technology, instruction.

Due to the pandemic and subsequent closing of many smaller institutions, students had to abruptly leave campus. A portion of students that were displaced, had no alternative living accommodations, thus making it highly unlikely that they would be successful in distance learning courses. The inability to stay on campus and take advantage of the auxiliary services creates a great hardship for students that rely on the technology provided by the university to complete assignments, exams, and other course activities particularly in sport management courses (Liguori & Winkler, 2020).

How do educators best support learners that face student hardship issues such as displacement and administer quality online instruction within sport management courses are two critical questions that administrators at HBCUs must answer. On the institutional level, many of these colleges and universities have responded to the question of how to administer quality online instruction by investing in faculty development. Faculty development has helped with transitioning from face to face to online instruction during the pandemic. Faculty development has prepared instructors and professors to create quality online instruction by using the standards that are set by Quality Matters. Quality Matters (QM) is the global organization leading quality assurance in online and innovative digital teaching and learning environments. During the process of redesigning face-to-face classes to distance courses, QM provided faculty with teaching aids such as rubrics, tools, and practices to improve the quality of online education (Crosslin et al. ,2020). They also fostered a culture of continuous improvement by integrating QM standards and processes into organizational plans to improve the quality of online education.

A sport management program director at one HBCU expressed that the Quality Matters standards helped the faculty to redesign the sport management courses in a manner that better suited students in an online format. The redesigned format helped learners to stay engaged within sport management courses by incorporating clear and precise directions and viable rubrics for proper feedback for assignments and projects. Studies suggest that students are unlikely to engage in distance learning course if the directions and feedback are not clear for assignments and projects (Howell, Saba, Lindsay, & William ,2004). By having clear and precise directions, students can better navigate course requirements and become active participants in sport management courses.

Online learning strategies in sport management courses at HBCUS As stated above, faculty development was a huge help in creating sport management courses that are usually face-to-face and interactive. During the global pandemic, face-to-face instruction and interaction in sport management courses were no longer feasible. The following section outlines the experience of a sport management faculty member at a HBCU and explores techniques aimed at promoting student engagement in distance learning.

Examples of learning activities from a sport management educator When transitioning my sport management course to a virtual format, I had to be very creative within my course design. My participation in the QM faculty development training at my institution provided useful tools that enabled me to create semester-long projects for a variety of sport management courses. These courses included sport facility and event management and courses in sport economics. With the applied nature of the field of sport management in mind, major projects were centered around the current global pandemic.

The project for the sport facility and event management course required students to create their own E-sport event and examine how they would have this event during the pandemic. The project was broken down into six parts. Each week, students virtually presented a part in class. Students provided research of the latest trends for events and facilities during the pandemic. Towards the end of the semester, students created a virtual presentation of their E-Sport event. Many students modeled the idea of creating a bubble for the event just as the NBA did to complete their season, while some created a plan to have a completely virtual E-sport event. The project for my sport economics course required students to develop different funding sources for sport facilities that took a financial loss during the pandemic. Students investigated financial losses of major sport venues and determined what strategies others used to regain revenue. Each week, students virtually presented their findings. This activity promoted student engagement and allowed students to remain interactive throughout the duration of the semester. Towards the end of the term, students created a virtual fundraising campaign based on their findings from the previous weeks. Implementing this type of format allowed the instructor to spark interest in the students, build on course objectives, and foster learning. They had clear instructions that were easy to follow, well-defined rubrics to pinpoint specific criteria, and prompt feedback for their project and weekly assignments. Along with clear instructions, the instructor's accessibility to students via zoom or email, helped reduce confusion and kept students engaged during the course. Viable solutions to learning pitfalls experienced during the pandemic

The pandemic has presented challenges in virtual learning to both instructors and students at historically black colleges and universities. Some of the major challenges associated with HBCU sport management online learning include equal access to devices, stable Internet connection, and difficulties in maintaining student engagement in virtual classrooms. Equal access to devices can be described as all students not owning or having reliable access to computers, tablets, or other electronic devices that allow them to complete online courses. This issue is prevalent as a number of students face financial challenges and other hardships that limit access to technology once they are away from their respective institution's campus. As discussed previously in this paper, many institutions are unable to provide all faculty and students with university issued devices. Leaving students to use inadequate devices, having no computers at all, or sharing a device with other members of their individual household. Often in this scenario other members of the household are all sharing a device for school, work, and leisure as a large part of the population are home due to the pandemic. In addition, international students are another segment of learners that are harshly being impacted by the transition into distance learning. Large portions of international students attend HBCUs through athletic scholarships, grants, or financial aid. Globally access to computers has not been universal and a digital divide exists even in countries that have an overall high rate of access to technology (Harris, Straker, & Pollock, 2017). To overcome the challenge of students not having access to computers, institutions must explore supplementary options of funding and furnishing devices. Sport management educators at HBCUs have been able to assist in overcoming the digital divide by providing classroom material through non-digital means as well as using technology that is more prevalent to students. This technology includes cellphones, and short message service, and applications like GroupMe that allow instructors to communicate with students as well as student-to-student interaction. For example, student lead GroupMe chats can be organized by classrooms and used to assist in student engagement. This method can be effective in improving communication, increasing collaboration and problem solving as students can utilize peer support. Baker, Leonard, & Milosavljevic (2020) suggest that having a stable internet connect is the biggest challenge facing students that participate in distance learning. This is particularly significant due to the large number of users who are home during the pandemic. Factors such as weather, location, and quality broadband access can cause disruptions in Internet connection for students. Previous literature indicates that disparities associated with broadband access can negate students from enrolling into distance learning courses altogether (Grubestic, 2008; Prieger & Wei-Min, 2008; Skinner, 2019). A solution to limited Internet connection includes the instructor recording live lectures and or posting instructional videos that can be accessed through the learning management system. This allows the student to access missed content at any time throughout the course.

Another common challenge experienced in online learning is maintaining a high level of student engagement in the virtual learning environment. Strategies to improve student engagement in this setting include promoting instructor presence and providing incentives for students to participate in the online environment. Instructor presence is essential in the virtual setting and has resulted in increased student affective learning, cognition, and motivation in learning (Baker, Leonard, & Milosavljevic, 2020). Sport management courses typically emphasize applied skills and incorporate various hands-on learning experiences, which can be difficult in online learning. However, using collaborative strategies and interactive tools such as virtual athletic facility tours, sport event planning projects, and virtual debates can assist in fostering student engagement in sport management distance learning courses. To maintain the applied nature of the field during distance learning, it is recommended that sport management educators seek learning opportunities that support professional development through remote activities. Professional sport organizations are hosting virtual workshops, seminars, and virtual internship/learning experiences as a way of engaging with potential job candidates. For example, sport management students from one HBCU participated in the Monumental Sports Sales Workshop and the Fenway Sports Management Virtual Learning Experience. Two programs that were created by professional sport organizations in lieu of the challenge of hosting traditional internship programs.

Conclusion The pandemic has created unique challenges for HBCU faculty and learners in the discipline of sport management. Many of these institutions of higher education have been faced with overcoming unprecedented challenges that have impacted daily operations and procedures on their campuses. The financial implications are complex as HBCU's rely on the fees from auxiliary services to supplement the costs of the university. The subsequent displacement of students and their inability to access these auxiliary services due to the closing of the university has caused financial strains for HBCU's and obstacles that have impeded learning. Furthermore, sport management faculty members at many HBCUs were forced to restructure their method of instruction to respond to the hardships students and faculty faced during the global pandemic. The transition from face-to-face instruction to distance learning has not gone without challenges. The recommendations of supporting faculty with faculty development, exploring options of furnishing devices, and utilizing electronic learning resources and applications can be used to mitigate the problems related to the learning shift during the pandemic.

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