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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

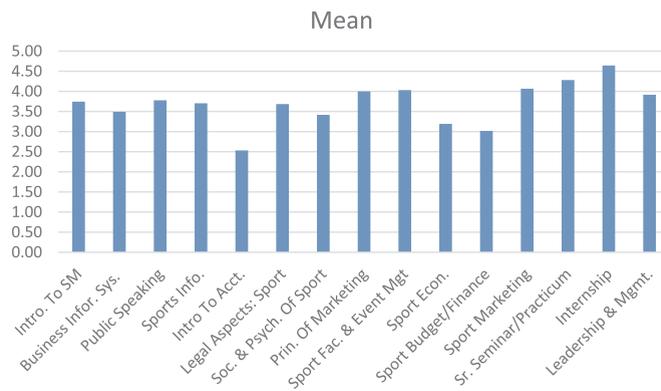


Fig. 1. Sport management undergraduate internship research.

beneficial and 5 being the most beneficial. The study found that graduating sport management students ( $n = 65$ ) consistently rate their experiential learning experiences as the most vital aspect of the curriculum, as compared with the courses required in the program. Specifically, the internship mean was 4.64, and the next most beneficial curricular component was the senior practicum/seminar at 4.28. Fig. 1 illustrates the results.

Although the student receives the greatest benefit from the internship experience, the internship agency benefits in that interns are a source of new ideas and new employees (Gault, Redington, & Schlager, 2000). Agencies also have the added benefit of being able to screen potential employees based upon their internship performance.

### 3.2. The university, sport management program, and internship coordinator

Many universities and academic programs, aware of the benefits of internships, have formal internship programs that invite – and in some instances require – students to participate in experiential learning opportunities. These formalized internship programs benefit universities by allowing the academic programs to test the relevance and appropriateness of their curricula and to establish the strength of the programs with internship agencies (Ross & Beggs, 2007). The internship also creates opportunities for academics to collaborate with partners in sport organizations, build and strengthen relationships between academia and businesses, develop research contacts with industry professionals, and update information regarding the needs of industry as well as the community (Pauline & Pauline, 2008). Furthermore, the internship coordinator's on-site visits help establish a solid connection between the university and the internship agency that may lead to future internships, research collaborations, and guest speaker appearances. Many of these opportunities can manifest through the efforts of the internship coordinator, a faculty member or staff member at the university who both provides a conduit from academia directly to the sport organization and who serves as the primary point of contact for students in the internship program. In many respects, the internship coordinator is the glue that holds the internship together.

### 3.3. The internship agency and the on-site supervisor

The selection of the internship agency and the on-site supervisor is key to a student's successful internship experience. The internship agency is a sport organization that has agreed to collaborate with the university to provide a guided learning experience for majors who wish to work in the field.

The on-site supervisor, an employee of the sport organization, shepherds the student-intern through the guided learning process. The literature is conclusive in highlighting the crucial role played by this individual in the success of the internship experience (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012, p. 47). The on-site supervisor is responsible for working with the student to develop and implement a systematic program designed to help the student meet his or her internship goals, while also serving as a mentor to the student throughout the internship. In effect, the on-site supervisor serves as the student's "teacher" throughout the internship process, and the quality of his or her supervision greatly influences the student's experience.

## 4. Applying Dewey's model

Sport management internships are interdependent relationships that require collaboration and commitment on the part of the primary stakeholders involved in the process: student, university, and internship agency. Dewey's model (1938) can be examined and drawn upon to develop a sensible approach for improving practices and procedures in sport management internships. Moreover, this internship process introduces a conversation that may help improve sport management internships in general.

Elements of Dewey's experiential learning theory are divided into the four phases of learning identified by Bower (2014): (1) Strategy (Teacher's Role, Learner Readiness Experience) – the pre-internship (whether it occurs through a seminar/class activities, one-on-one advisement, or in another manner), in which the student is exposed to a blueprint for further experiential learning; (2)

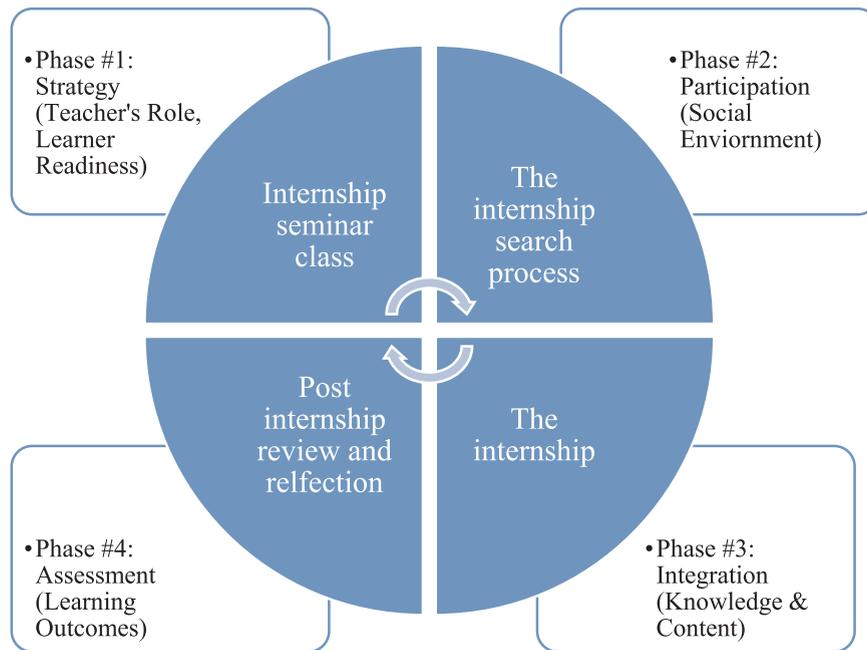


Fig. 2. Dewey's experiential learning model as applied to sport management internships.

Participation (Social Environment) – the internship search process; (3) Integration (Knowledge and Content of Organization) – the actual internship, which integrates theory and practice; and (4) Assessment (Learning Outcomes) – the post internship review and reflection. Fig. 2 depicts Dewey's experiential learning model as it applies to sport management internships.

A deeper examination of the internship processes and outcomes led to some practical recommendations that aim to enhance the sport management internship experience.

#### 4.1. Strategy (teacher's role, learner readiness)

In this phase, students learn about the prerequisites and eligibility criteria for participation in an internship through a seminar/class, advisement, orientation, and/or practicum. This includes the ability to take concepts from class lectures, learning activities, observations, and reflections, and to integrate them into logically sound theories that relate to their internships and guided learning experiences. In practice, this phase is designed to allow for further planning of the various situated learning activities students will encounter while conducting their internships. For example, students should be exposed to the practical application of theory in the workplace through role playing, observation (e.g., videos or site visits), or speakers (i.e., guest speakers from the sport industry). Traditionally, the strategy phase is completed the semester prior to the student's internship in preparation for the full-time internship experience. It provides students with valuable information and practice in a variety of areas, including preparing a resume, writing cover letters, improving interview skills, understanding internship requirements and procedures, and completing assignments required by the internship. At some institutions, pre-internship work experience or practicum hours are also a requirement of this phase. Notably, it is common to have some overlap between this phase and the internship search because the selection of an internship site often takes weeks or even months to finalize.

Of paramount importance in the Strategy phase is teaching students to engage in reflective thinking about their experiences. Students should reflect on the organization and its mission as well as the opportunities and challenges faced by the sport organization that is hosting their practicum or internship. This type of reflective thinking encourages students to think, conceptually about how they might assist an organization in realizing its mission and attaining its goals. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), when referring to high-impact practices such as internships, emphasizes the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards, which state that an internship should be “a deliberative form of learning” that involves “doing,” reflection, and “feedback for improvement” – all in support of “learning goals and objectives” (O'Neill, 2010).

Further evidence of the value of reflective thinking and writing can be found in the field of medical education and training within the United States. A growing body of work indicates that reflection, such as narrative writing exercises, promotes transformational learning where a change in one's consciousness and understanding of an event occurs and results in personal and professional development (Clark, 1993). In the field of medical education, these types of reflective exercises are referred to as triggers or catalysts for personal growth. Finally, reflective writing introduces students to a mindset of continuous learning and teaches them to ask reflective questions (Capasso & Daresh, 2001). In essence, the value of reflection and reflective writing appears to have efficacy in terms of promoting personal growth and self-confidence within the context of the work environment (Levine et al., 2006).

Additionally, reflective writing aids students in recognizing opportunities to display initiative and be self-starters, which

ultimately makes them more valuable to organizations because they distinguish themselves as more than a mere “gofer.” Thus, this skill will equip them with important tools to evaluate how to best be of value to a sport entity as well as determine in a substantive manner if the actual work/processes are a good fit for their vocational preferences. In the aforementioned study of undergraduate sport management students, the qualitative data included high marks for the reflective writing assignments. For example, one student commented on these reflective writing assignments, stating: “Although it was difficult to get started, the paper helped clarify in my mind, how much I was learning, and how I could take these skills to my next job.” Another student wrote: “The reflective writing experiences crystallized all that I learned and gave me confidence that I can be successful in a real work environment” (Goldfine, 2017).

Prior to beginning their practicums and internships, students are encouraged to engage in self-reflection regarding the work they will be asked to do as part of the practicum or internship. Specifically, students need to consider whether the tasks and responsibilities outlined for their practicum or internship are likely to be personally meaningful and rewarding. Many times, sport management students are seduced by what they perceive to be the glamour and prestige of working for a high profile sport organization without really considering the actual tasks associated with positions in those organizations.

#### 4.2. Participation (social environment)

In the Participation phase, students involve themselves fully in the internship process by actively searching for an internship site. To complete this task, students must typically do the following:

- (1) identify their area of sport interest (professional sports, college, youth, etc.);
- (2) meet with their internship coordinator or academic advisor;
- (3) identify their preferred geographic location for the internship (local, regional, national, or international);
- (4) identify areas of internship specialization (marketing, ticketing, programming, events, etc.);
- (5) evaluate which internships provide them with the most substantive, resume-building experiences; and
- (6) identify the agencies that meet their criteria and begin communicating with those agencies.

The institution/sport management program typically has established policies and procedures for all parties (i.e., students, internship agency, and institution) involved in this process. These policies and procedures will likely cover, but are not limited to, payment of students during the internship, criteria agencies must meet in order host interns, memorandum of understanding that outlines the specific details related to the internship, housing assistance provided by the internship agency, liability coverage, and any legal requirements that must be addressed in order for the student to participate in the internship.

#### 4.3. Integration (knowledge and content)

During the Integration phase, it is essential that all stakeholders collaborate closely with one another. The on-site supervisor in particular is central to this collaboration since quality internship experiences typically occur when students have a specific on-site supervisor to whom they report on a regular basis. As Dieffenback, Murray, and Zakrajsek (2011) suggest, a qualified person with experience in the profession is best suited to supervise students enrolled in an internship. To that point, the internship agency must commit to providing the student (i.e., intern) a well-rounded learning experience that includes, but is not limited to, orientation, training, monitoring, and evaluation of the intern for the duration of his or her internship experience. More specifically, the on-site supervisor serves as the student's mentor during the internship experience, plays many roles throughout the internship (e.g., mentor, teacher, supervisor, etc.), and is responsible for signing required paperwork, completing student evaluations, communicating regularly with the student to give consistent and constructive feedback, and communicating with the institution's internship coordinator as needed.

For students, the Integration phase involves making decisions, solving problems, and linking academic knowledge to practical skills, which are applied to real-world situations. Although internship experiences provide valuable learning opportunities for the students, they also have an essential academic component. Academic credits for internships can be pass/fail or a letter grade, and assessment of the student's academic achievement can occur through a variety of assignments that are completed during the internship. The on-site supervisor's assessment of a student's progress can be completed in the form of mid-term and final evaluations. To facilitate assessment, most internship programs have established rubrics or grading tools to guide the supervisor in evaluating the student's performance and to allow the program coordinator to award a grade, if required, for the work the student has completed.

#### 4.4. Assessment (learning outcomes)

In the Assessment phase, students are asked to reflect on their internship experience from many different perspectives. Reflection is an important component of the conceptual model since it allows students to identify the personal and professional benefits realized through the completion of their sport management internship. Consequently, most institutions and programs have mechanisms in place that encourage students to review and reflect on their experiences. For example, students may be required to participate in a post-internship meeting with the internship coordinator, the main goal of which is to evaluate the overall experience and provide an opportunity for the students to reflect on and share experiences with the internship coordinator and other sport management students. Alternatively, students might be asked to write a reflective assignment that affords them the opportunity to analyze their

experiences and to articulate the influence the internship has had on their personal and professional development, while allowing them to connect classroom theory to real-world experiences.

## 5. Discussion

Considering that the vast majority of sport management programs require their students to complete internships (86% in the United States) (Jones et al., 2008; Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011) and that internships are the most common curricular component in these programs, these experiences should be structured in a way that allows students to benefit to the highest degree in terms of knowledge and skill acquisition. To that end, the paramount goal of this paper is to emphasize the importance of integrating the primary stakeholders in a well-organized and comprehensive fashion. In order for the internship to have meaning and purpose, students, institutions, and practitioners as the primary stakeholders all play a vital role in determining the value of the experience. Applying Dewey's learning theory to the basics of designing, monitoring, and evaluating students' internship experiences helps illustrate the interconnectedness of the stakeholders and highlights the importance of their coordinated collaboration. If sport management internships are void of these well-delineated roles and clearly defined purposes, students are likely to gain significantly less from these experiential learning opportunities in terms of critical thinking and reflection as well as on the job skill development. Providing a more structured approach to sport management internships can also result in positive benefits to the other stakeholders, including the university and sport organization.

Given that internships are required by more than 80% of sport management programs in the U.S. (suggesting that educators recognize the value of internships) and that students report that they value mandatory internships as a graduation requirement for sport management degree programs (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016), an argument might be made that all sport management programs should include internships. However, the mere act of incorporating an internship does not ensure the success of a sport management program or guarantee employment for its graduates.

In order for an internship program to be successful (and thereby contribute to the success of a sport management program and its graduates), it must be well organized, effectively administered, and have the full support and investment of its various stakeholders. Moreover, according to some researchers, the success of an internship can only be achieved when the involvement of those stakeholders is motivated by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors (Zopiatis & Constanti, 2012). Thus, it might be argued, that intrinsically motivated students are more likely to have successful internships and, therefore, sport management programs would be well advised to explore measures for fostering intrinsic motivation among their students through courses and activities leading up to the internship.

In considering the intrinsic motivation of students, it is important to recognize that when internships are a required component of a program, it is difficult to truly assess whether students are intrinsically motivated to participate in the internship. If internships are NOT required, it is more likely that true intrinsic motivation is driving student participation. While it is anticipated that intrinsically motivated interns are more likely to be ambitious in the workplace, less likely to cause problems for the organization hosting their internship, and more capable of assuming greater responsibility than students who view the internship as obligatory, further research is warranted to investigate this assumption and explore its implications.

Ultimately, whether programs require internships or view them as an elective offering, and regardless of the level of intrinsic motivation demonstrated by the sport management students, the recommendations provided herein for enhancing the learning outcomes can be applied to maximize the benefits to those students participating in internships.

## 6. Conclusion

It is important to note that this paper is one small brick in a relatively large wall of knowledge. Current research (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Eagleman & McNary, 2010; Foster & Dollar, 2010; King, 2009; Koo, Diacin, Khojasteh, & Dixon, 2016; Odio et al., 2014; Ross & Beggs, 2007; Schneider & Steer, 2003) highlights the need for further investigation into sport management internship best practices and procedures, and that research should be expanded to include all stakeholders and all facets of the internship experience. It is suggested that future research focus on internship feasibility and opportunities to enable sport management programs to create optimal internship experiences for all stakeholders. Additionally, further research is recommended to compare levels of intrinsic motivation and achievement of learning outcomes between programs that require a sport management internship *vis a vis* programs that offer them on an elective basis.

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