

SPORT MANAGEMENT FIELD EXPERIENCES AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: ENSURING BENEFICIAL OUTCOMES AND PREVENTING EXPLOITATION

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INTRODUCTION

A sport management field experience takes place when a student receives academic credit, as part of a formal sport management curriculum, for going to a sport management organization and being literally and integrally involved in the day-to-day operations of that organization. Typically, the field experience is referred to as an internship that takes place at a site away from the college/university campus that awards academic credit for the real-life (doing and learning) internship experience. In reality, internships can play an indispensable role in the education and professional preparation of sport management personnel (Stier, 2002).

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Learning through experience, more formally known as experiential learning, is the process by which the student learns by actually doing or performing real-world tasks while engaged in a formal, structured field experience. A general goal of a field experience is to execute ideas and theory learned and discussed in the classroom within the real world setting of sport and sport business. "Through. . .the unique experience provided by internships. . .the sports management students are literally immersed in the culture of the business of sports" (Hunter & Mayo, 1999, p. 76).

The practical aspect of internships, in the curricula of sport management, is so important that the national standards promulgated by the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) endorse the requirements of inclusion of field experiences at both the undergraduate and graduate levels of professional preparation programs, in order to obtain approval as an "approved" program (Schneider & Stier, 2000; Stier & Schneider, 2000; Stier, 2000a). In fact, internships have become the modus operand of almost every professional preparation program in sport management in this country and abroad, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Stier, 2000b).

Learning through experience (experiential learning) has long been recognized as an effective means of learning. Dewey (1938) created the foundation from which experiential learning can be based, partly by identifying the close and necessary relationship between the process of actual experience and education. More recently, Heron (1989) reaffirmed that experiential knowledge is knowledge gained through action and practice. Heron also indicated that experiential learning is by encounter, by direct acquaintance and takes place through the process of being there, face-to-face, with the person, at the event, in the experience.

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CONNECTION BETWEEN SPORT MANAGEMENT FIELD EXPERIENCES AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Rogers (1983, pp. 278-279) identified seven assumptions [presented below] that build a foundation for experiential learning. These seven assumptions can also be used as a framework to provide a more thorough understanding of sport management field experiences. Following each of the seven assumptions below (in italics), the authors have addressed each from a sport management field experience perspective.

1. *Human beings have a natural potentiality for learning.* Sport management students not only have the potentiality for learning but most also have a sincere thirst for learning both in field experiences as well as in the actual work place (post field experiences). The potential for learning in field experiences is great since the participants recognize that such learning and mastery of skills will have a major positive impact upon their sport management career and professional advancement.
2. *Significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student to have relevance for [his/her] own purposes.* Since the “own purpose” of most interns is to gain knowledge and experiences that will lead them to full-time employment in the area that most interests them, field experience coordinators should keep this in mind when developing the field experience work contract with the on-site supervisor. One way to help ensure that interns perceive the content/subject matter of the field experience to be relevant for their own purposes is to seek their input throughout the development of the contract.
3. *Much significant learning is acquired through doing.* Field experiences must, by definition, be hands-on. Interns must be given responsibilities and must be held accountable for bringing tasks to closure. The intern should be actively involved. Learning will take place at a faster rate when real stakes are placed on work-related actions and behaviors.
4. *Learning is facilitated when a student participates responsibly in the learning process.* Responsible participation on the part of interns requires that interns be, among other things, punctual, self-motivated, and of a strong work ethic. To gain outcomes, interns must follow guidelines set forth in the contract and the operating procedures of the sport organization. Learning and appropriate outcomes cannot take place without responsible participation on behalf of the interns.
5. *Self-initiated learning, involving the whole person of the learner, involving feelings as well as intellect, is the most pervasive and lasting.* Interns must be proactive throughout the internship, making sure that they ask questions and obtain necessary information in order to effectively carryout their assigned tasks. When assigned a responsibility and held accountable for attaining major outcomes, interns will involve their “whole person” to successfully elicit the outcomes. Being involved as a “whole person” will result in the interns drawing deep from their intellect and passion as means to achieve the outcomes desired by the sport organization. These are the type of learning experiences that are not forgotten and are utilized by interns for future tasks and jobs.
6. *Creativity in learning is best facilitated when self-criticism and self-evaluation are primary, and evaluation by others is of secondary importance.* Parts of field experiences may include creative learning and other parts may not. Overall, there is a need for constructive criticism during and at the conclusion of the internship. Many, if not most, sport management related tasks include a structure specific to the task that can be perfected through supervisory feedback. Certainly, if interns are given a responsibility that requires complete creativity or requires a creative element, they must be allowed to bring the project to closure with limited supervisory criticism. If interns are not creative, obviously, they should not be assigned creative tasks.
7. *The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning, a continuing openness to experience, an incorporation into oneself of the process of change.* The on-campus sport management field experience coordinator must take a lead role in understanding the process of learning and implementing it into the field experience. To that end, the field experience coordinator must also be open to input and be able to change, based on feedback from the on-site supervisors, interns, and current literature.

The addressing of the above seven assumptions of experiential learning, from a sport management field experience perspective, provides a basic understanding of how these field experiences align nicely with

experiential learning. However, to gain a complete understanding of the sport management field experience as an experiential learning endeavor, further information is needed and is provided below.

Sport management field experiences require two qualified supervisors: one who represents the interests of the school's sport management program, commonly referred to as a field experience coordinator; and, another who represents the interests of the sport organization where the field experience will be taking place, commonly referred to as an on-site supervisor. In almost all cases, the field experience coordinator will be either a sport management professor or person on campus, identified as the individual responsible for placing the student interns *and* overseeing the students' internship experiences at the various site locations. And, in most cases, the on-site supervisor is generally a full-time employee who, in addition to one's primary role in the sport organization, assumes the added responsibility of managing and supervising – on a day-to-day basis – student interns. Each student, with guidance from the field experience coordinator working closely with the on-site supervisor, applies theory and knowledge learned in the classroom to the off-campus sport organization.

TWO TYPES OF FIELD EXPERIENCES – INTERNSHIPS AND PRACTICA EXPERIENCES

Field experiences are generally of two basic types: practica and internships. Normally, an internship is the culminating experience of the sport management curriculum. A sport management intern, in many cases, assumes the role of a full-time employee (most frequently without significant or meaningful pay) of the sport organization, for at least an entire semester.

As sport management interns, the students have reached the culminating phase of their academic preparation. At this point they should be able to apply and implement what they have learned from professors, textbooks, and prior experiences into a real sport organization. The interns should be required to complete tasks that are necessary for the organization to function productively. These tasks may or may not be leadership oriented, but nevertheless should be real and meaningful.

Upon successful completion, sport management interns receive the credit equivalent of anywhere from 3 to 15 semester hours of academic credit. In order to emphasize the importance of the internship, a grade should be provided rather than simply assigning a “pass” or “non-pass” mark. The on-site supervisor should have considerable input in the grade of the intern, but the ultimate determination of the final grade of the internship should rest in the hands of a sport management faculty member responsible for the interns. At the end of the experience, each student/intern should have: (a) developed and refined appropriate and necessary sport management skills, and (b) successfully established, for job networking purposes, potential long term professional relationships with employees within the sport organization.

Practica are part of the sport management curriculum and are usually part of a class. In many quarters it is thought of as a pre-internship experience, sometimes taking place on the campus of the school granting credit for this type of beginning practical experience. The “pre-internship has become more significant in recent years—so much so that more colleges and universities are incorporating formal pre-internship (practica experiences) opportunities for students early in their academic career” (Stier, 2002, p. 8).

Practica are similar to an internship except that it is not as time intensive, nor as sophisticated as a full-fledged internship. Practica experience also may not include as many hands-on responsibilities on the part of the sport management student. Since practica experiences usually take place “early on” in the sport management curriculum or academic program, the students, when beginning a practicum, often have to spend some time observing until they are ready to begin to engage in actual hands-on experiences. The overall purpose of the practica is similar to that of an internship in that it begins to bridge the gap between theory and practice—but the level of sophistication *and* the level of involvement and contributions, on behalf of the individual student, are far less than the actual internship.

PAID AND NON-PAID (INTERNSHIP) FIELD EXPERIENCES

Internships may be paid or non-paid. Both types of internships have advantages, depending upon one's perspective. The obvious advantage of the paid internship is the earning of income by the intern throughout one's experience. One obvious rationale for not wanting to pay the interns is that this tactic or strategy saves the sport entity money. And, with the overabundance of students seeking meaningful internships (over supply), there is often no incentive or real need for the sport organization to provide meaningful payment in the form of a sport management stipend, since there always seems to be sufficient would-be interns willing to accept a non-paying field experience, especially if the site is highly desirable or attractive to the student.

Another possible disadvantage with paying an intern may involve an unwillingness on the part of the sport organization to fully meet the needs of the intern and/or educational institution when the sport entity is paying good, hard cash for the services of the student intern. On-site supervisors at paid internship sites frequently make the argument that since the interns are receiving meaningful compensation from the sport organization, the on-site supervisor should have exclusive control over the interns' responsibilities and activities. Add to this argument the fact that the sport organizations are expected to further educate/teach their interns how to perform in the real world of sport business, it is no wonder that some sport entities and on-site supervisors think that they are often taken advantage of by the schools seeking internship sites. Needless to say, in the event that an on-site supervisor wants exclusive control over an intern's responsibilities, there is a very real potential for significant problems, unless those responsibilities are in line with those established by the field experience coordinator/professor.

There is much consternation on the campuses of those schools offering sport management curricula insofar as the payment question for interns. In reality, there is little incentive for sport organizations offering internship sites to provide meaningful pay to interns since the number of qualified interns greatly exceeds the number of quality and prestigious internship sites. The result is simply a matter of supply and demand, and with a greater number (supply) of would-be or wanna-be interns, is it any question that so few sport entities with internships actually pay a suitable or appropriate wage?

INTERACTION BETWEEN THE FIELD EXPERIENCE COORDINATOR AND THE ON-SITE SUPERVISOR

Acquainting and educating the on-site supervisors at the sport organizations providing the internships, as to the overall purpose of sport management field experiences, is absolutely essential. Field experience coordinators/professors must assume this essential, and often time consuming role. Specific goals and objectives of field experiences should be cooperatively established and agreed upon by the school's field experience coordinator with input from the sport organization's on-site supervisor and the intern.

It is imperative that a working relationship be established and cultured between the on-site supervisors and the field experience coordinator. Although the field experience coordinator might dutifully develop a well-organized outline as to what should take place during the field experience, there are many ways an on-site supervisor can circumvent the outlined goals and objectives. One way to prevent this circumvention is to have a well-established working relationship between the on-site supervisor and the school's field experience coordinator.

MEETING SPORT MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES AND THE EXPLOITATION OF THE INTERN

To help insure that students actually gain meaningful sport management job-related experiences from internships, specific goals and objectives of the field experience must be established, well in advance of the actual internship. Well thought out goals and objectives will provide a structured guideline from which both the on-site supervisor and the intern can operate. The three

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primary parties involved in the field experience – the field experience coordinator, the on-site supervisor, and the intern – should create the objective of the field experience. Unfortunately, sometimes field experience objectives are not met. Below, is an outline of three of the more common reasons why field experience objectives are typically not met.

The first reason why field experiences are not realized fully is also the most obvious, as well as the least excusable. Specifically, it is because no objectives are even established. The primary responsibility of spearheading the task of establishing objectives falls on the shoulders of the sport management faculty member who is responsible for overseeing, coordinating and supervising field experiences. This faculty member must initiate a meeting or establish communications that involve both the on-site supervisor and the intern in the process of creating objectives and goals for the successful field experience.

The second reason why objectives may not be met is because objectives may not align with the tasks and duties available for and assigned to interns at a particular sport organization. Sport management faculty members who serve as field coordinators must work closely with (off campus) on-site supervisors to insure that the objectives are reasonable, suitable and attainable within each sport organization. And, the third reason for failing to realize field experience objectives is simply because on-site supervisors merely choose to ignore them, sometimes in a rather blatant fashion.

The sport management intern may be considered to be exploited if an on-site supervisor consistently ignores the objectives and places the intern on a different work agenda than outlined on the contract. This type of exploitation takes place as a conscious effort on the part of the on-site supervisor to modify or change the contract in a way that benefits the sport organization, but not necessarily the intern. When an intern is directed to perform roles outside of the parameters of the original field experience objectives – with or without intent to do so by the on-site supervisor – exploitation of the intern is taking place. Unless agreed upon by the field experience coordinator, on-site supervisor, and intern, the contract should remain and be followed as it was originally drawn up.

To prevent this type of intern exploitation from taking place, a system to monitor the week-to-week progress of the intern is advisable. Something as simple as requiring a brief end-of-week update, each week, in the form of an e-mail or snail mail from the intern to the school's field experience coordinator is often an effective means of ensuring that tasks engaged in are in alignment with the objectives.

Instead of providing the sport management intern with necessary experiences to become more marketable for the workforce, often the intern is exploited by the on-site supervisor for the gain of the sport organization. Sport management interns are exploited in a number of ways, most of which are preventable by a well defined and agreed upon description of intern responsibilities by the field experience coordinator, on-site supervisor, and the intern. The key, in many instances, is nothing more than having three-way communication among the school, the sport organization, and the intern.

WHAT CAN TAKE PLACE IN A FIELD EXPERIENCE—THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

Generally speaking, there are three things that can happen to the sport management intern. First, the intern can be almost neglected and not required or expected to do anything of value. In effect, the intern is merely expected to do “nothing” of value but to “wait out” the term of the internship. An example might be the fitness club that assigns the intern to baby sit the children of patrons in the facility's day care center. The second consequence involves the site that goes to the other extreme and assigns unreasonable tasks and responsibilities to the intern expecting the intern to perform at the level of a seasoned professional, rather than as a beginning intern. And, finally, the third possibility involves a site that combines an educational experience with appropriate, timely and suitable jobs and tasks given to the intern, all under the constant (daily) supervision and guidance of a caring, experienced, and competent on-site overseer.

One of the more insidious types of intern exploitation, however, takes place by sport organizations that operate with a revolving door of interns, never having to hire full-time employees. Even though meaningful experiences may be gained by the intern, paying job opportunities never become available.

A related type of exploitation takes place when the sport entity grants a student an internship experience, without pay – or at, or below minimum wage – and expects the intern to perform *as an employee*, thereby effectively taking the place of a would-be paid employee. The term coined to reflect this type of questionable employment/staffing strategy is called the “*Internship Model of Staffing*” (Stier, 1990).

The phrase “*internship model of staffing*” was coined to refer to the situation in which: “sport organizations are more than willing to take advantage of interns, most of whom are unpaid volunteers, by using these individuals in lieu of hiring entry-level professionals to work within their organizations” (Stier, 2001, p. 5). This strategy of securing staffing is not only unethical, but may also be illegal as well, under certain circumstances (as explained below), if the interns are not paid for their services.

The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act provides six criteria that allow companies and organizations to avoid paying the student-intern even the prevailing minimum wage. These include: (a) the employer should not immediately and materially benefit from the presence, work and contributions of the intern, (b) the intern should not replace a regular, paid employee, (c) the internship experience should be similar to what would be offered in a vocational school, (d) the intern must be cognizant that no pay is forthcoming, (e) the intern is not guaranteed employment following the field experience, and (f) the field experience is for the benefit of the student intern (not primarily for the sport entity or business).

In reality, the Labor Department uses the criterion: *Who Benefits Most?* Thus, if the greatest benefit of the internship (field) experience is realized by the student intern, rather than the sport business or organization providing the internship experience, there is no need for pay to be given to the student intern. However, if the student intern’s work and contributions to the company/organization outweigh the benefits gained by the student, financial remuneration for the student is in order, or else the student is being exploited and the company/organization might well be violating the law (Unpaid Interns, 1996).

ONE INSTITUTION’S STRATEGY TO INSURE MEANINGFUL AND PRAGMATIC FIELD EXPERIENCES FOR THE INTERN

The State University of New York (Brockport) was among the first three institutions within the United States to initiate an undergraduate program of sport management (Stier, 1999, p. 13). From the beginning, the faculty members were very concerned with (a) providing a sufficient number of real-life practical experiences throughout the students’ undergraduate experience *and* (b) insuring that the graduates of the sport management program were indeed competent, experienced and skilled young professionals ready, eager, and willing to enter the sport business profession.

To accomplish these twin goals, the faculty instituted (a) a series of practical field experiences, in addition to a core of courses devoted to the study of sport management, as well as (b) a critical assessment mechanism to insure that only the most qualified students were admitted to and graduated from the sport management program.

FIELD EXPERIENCES

The first of these field experiences were referred to as *Practica I* and, to this day, still involves a requirement for students, in their very first sport management course, to be engaged in a field experience, for a minimum of 30 clock-hours, within an established and appropriate sport business entity. This initial field experience is followed by another requirement (in a subsequent major course requirement) for an even more in-depth field

experience (*Practica II*), which involved a minimum of 60 clock-hours of supervised activities at an appropriate off-campus sport business site.

The third aspect of field experiences required of the sport management students at SUNY Brockport is the off-campus research project required of all students, as juniors. This field experience requires each student to initiate an independent (but supervised) research project involving a problematic situation or challenge at an (outside) existing sport entity or business. This active involvement on behalf of the student at a sport organization, entity or business enables the student to gain valuable insight, knowledge and experience in the real world of sport and the business of sport, particularly at the site/organization where the research project takes place. Upon completion of the sophisticated research project, the student completes a formal report of the study and makes the findings and recommendations available to the sport entity. In addition, the student also must conduct, at a formal setting, a power-point presentation (open to the public) at the university.

The fourth and final piece of the field experience puzzle at SUNY Brockport is the traditional sport management internship in which a student is actively engaged in an off-campus sport business site, working under the auspices of both the campus field coordinator and the on-site supervisor. The field experience may be paid or not paid, depending upon the particular situation and the duties/responsibilities of the intern.

THE “EXIT” INTERVIEW

The exit interview is the final unique aspect of the SUNY at Brockport’s sport management program and provides a realistic means of critically assessing students who are making formal applications to begin their full-time internship experiences during the next semester. The exit interview provides for 4-6 experts, currently engaged in the sport business world, to come to the campus and actually interview each senior student (45-60 minutes per student), in a formal group interview setting. Each student is required to complete a formal, written application for this exit interview. The completed application is duplicated and sent to each of the professionals making up the exit interview group, at least two weeks prior to the scheduled date of the interview.

The goal of the exit interview is to make sure that only qualified students are allowed to proceed in the sport management curricula, and to begin their internships, and graduate from the program. Students are provided, throughout their undergraduate courses, questions that may be asked in the exit interview session by the sport management/business experts. Each interviewer is provided with a score sheet (rubric) with which to score the responses of each interviewee.

Following the conclusion of each interview session, the committee confers and makes a recommendation to the program coordinator/director. If the recommendation is that the student is ready and competent to begin the internship, the student is so notified by the program director at a private meeting scheduled the next week with that student. If, however, the recommendation is that the student is not ready or competent to initiate an internship, the student is also made aware of that fact during a meeting with the program director. In a subsequent meeting, the program director provides to the student a list of deficiencies revealed in the interview session and is provided with a list of remedies that are open to the student. For example, the student may pursue additional course work, attend workshops and clinics, pursue individual readings and research, as well as experience other types of learning—all in an effort to remedy deficiencies or areas of weakness of the student.

This student, in the post exit interview session with the program director, may agree to complete these further learning experiences and, when completed, may then apply for the next round of exit interviews during a subsequent semester. If the student fails to compensate for these shortcomings or deficiencies, the student may not proceed to begin an internship and may not continue within the sport management curriculum.

The exit interview is very similar to the bar examination for lawyers. An individual may graduate from a law school but is not considered a lawyer or attorney-at-law until that person has successfully passed the bar in the

state where the individual resides. So too, the sport management student at SUNY Brockport may not proceed beyond the exit interview stage unless the student “passes” the interview evaluation session. Failure to pass prevents the person from graduating with the sport management certification.

CONCLUDING STATEMENT

The field experience component of sport management is an essential element of the overall educational experience for producing future leaders in the business of sport. Without meaningful field experiences, whether they be practica, independent research projects, internships, or some variation of exit interviews, the reality of the matter is that practical, real-world experiences are a vital part of one’s education—if one is to understand and master the nuances of the business world of sport. It is the responsibility of those individuals in charge of the sport management programs, graduate and undergraduate alike, to insure that meaningful field experiences remain at the forefront of the educational experiences of our future leaders in the sport industry.

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