

A STRATEGY FOR INTERNSHIP-SEEKING SPORT MANAGEMENT STUDENTS

Kevin Ayers, Ph.D., Western Carolina University

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to describe a strategy for undergraduate sport management students to obtain an internship. Many universities require students to complete full-time internships in order to graduate. The benefits of the internship experience for sport management students have been well-documented (Hager, 1984; Parkhouse, 1978; 1984; 1987; Parks, 1991; VanderZwaag, 1980). Obtaining an internship can be a difficult and stressful prospect especially when the institution does not engage in placement. One philosophy is to allow students to engage in self-search when it comes to securing an internship. Cuneen and Sidwell (1994) addressed the benefits and shortcomings of the student self-search versus the student placement process of obtaining internships in the text *Sport Management Field Experiences*. Recently, many authors have written about the internship experience (Cuneen, 2004; Cuneen & Sidwell, 1993b; Kelly 2004; Moorman, 2004; Verner 1993, 2004; Williams, 2004; Young & Baker 2004). Others have concentrated on the importance and usefulness of the internship experience (Cuneen, 2004; Young & Baker 2004). Some have written about the legal aspects of the sport management internship (Anderson & Ayres, 2002; Miller 2002; Moorman, 2004) while others have written about the sponsoring agencies' perspective with sport management internships (Williams, 2004). Peretto Stratta (2004) analyzed the concerns of the sport management students with regards to the internship experience. Few have written about specific strategies used to attain the sport management internship (Cuneen and Sidwell, 1994; Verner, 2004). This paper discusses one strategy students engage in during a course, Sport Management Seminar, during their last semester of coursework and prior to their internship experience. This strategy could prove useful to sport management faculty that employs the student self-search process in obtaining internships.

REQUIREMENTS FOR STUDENT INTERNSHIP

Students are required to complete all coursework prior to undergoing internship at our university for two primary reasons. First, the student is expected to have a general body of knowledge and a strong theoretical foundation that will enable him to be successful when entering the sport industry workforce. Second, the old adage, "It is easier to get a job while you have a job," comes into play. Often students are offered full-time employment from their internship site or from a company they have networked with while performing their internship. If the students have completed all coursework and will graduate upon completion of the internship experience, then they are free to accept such a position. If they take internship prior to the completion of all their required coursework, the students must turn down such offers in order to finish their degree requirements. This can make finding a job more challenging. Having a job or internship creates value in the minds of prospective employers. As the reader will read later, the process for finding and securing an internship is similar to finding full-time employment and can make finding such employment easier while actually completing their internship.

At our university, students take a three-hour course titled "Sport Management Seminar," that has as its primary objective, to empower the student with the tools that will enable them to obtain an internship. The process by which students work toward obtaining an internship follows the tenet that the student take responsibility for all the activities that increase the probability of succeeding and securing an internship. This philosophical approach has

advantages and disadvantages and is different from other institutions that favor placement of students at pre-designated internship sites. Cuneen and Sidwell (1994) list advantages of student self-search for internships as: motivation; preparation; preparation and development of objectives by the sponsoring organization; increased learning of internship opportunities; student interaction about potential internship sites; the ability to evaluate potential internship site, and the ability to negotiate remuneration. Disadvantages include: students may choose a site based solely on convenience; students may not be thorough; students may be unduly influenced by others; remuneration may be the sole criteria ignoring other important factors; expectations may be unrealistic and students may underestimate living expenses. We believe that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and, with a solid strategy and process for students' self-search, many if not all the disadvantages can be overcome.

THE PLAN OF ACTION (POA)

One challenge for faculty in having the student conduct self-search is the loss of control and potential student failure. Therefore, it is important for a self-search process to be defined, measurable, and easily communicated. The first step in the student-driven self-search process is for the student to develop a plan of action (POA). The POA aids the student in identifying his goals and objectives and specific strategies that he will take to begin the internship hunt process. Within the POA, the student writes down his specific goals and objectives. After the goals and objectives are defined, the students select three potential internship locations to contact. The POA is a document that is reviewed periodically by the faculty to ensure the students' goals are robust, obtainable, and realistic. For example, if the student has specific financial limitations, then an internship site must either compensate the student adequately or the student must choose a site that does not impose an undue financial burden on him.

Students can either submit the document for review by the faculty member or can give classroom oral presentations. An advantage to a short two-minute oral presentation on goals, objectives, strategy and target internship site, is that it allows the student to articulate and explain their decision making and internship site selection process. It also allows the faculty to give feedback directly to the student and allows for other students in the classroom to participate in the conversations. This process should take place within the first two weeks of the semester.

“ACTIVE” SITES AND EVALUATIONS

Once the goals, objectives, strategies, and target internship sites have been selected, the student is then charged with making the internship site “active.” “Active” means that the student has contacted each potential internship site and identified and spoken with the decision maker within the organization and determined if an internship is available for the specified time period. Many students will eliminate potential sites simply by engaging in this activity. If an internship site is eliminated, the student is responsible for replacing a discarded internship site with a new “active” site. Maintaining three active enhances the probability of the student successfully obtaining an internship for the semester in which he desires. This process allows the student to research each targeted firm and pursue or eliminate potential sites that do not fulfill students' goals and objectives. Creating an “active” internship site data-base for each student should take place within the third and fourth week of the semester. Students are encouraged to set up interviews with all “active” sites at this time.

The second two-minute speech should take place in the fifth and sixth weeks of the semester. Faculty should evaluate whether or not each student has three “active” sites within his portfolio. If a student does not have the three required “active,” sites then the student must meet with the faculty member to discuss a strategy to fulfill this requirement. On the POA, the student should also have a “Notes” section about each “active” site. This “notes” section

should contain all contact information for the “active” sites including names; addresses; phone numbers; fax numbers; dates of contacts; information requested and sent to the firms; specific job requirements; certifications required; insurance policies required; and any “tickler” information. “Tickler” information is any information that will aid the student in the networking process. It may include the names of children; weather conditions; personal habits of firm representatives; or any other information the student gathers on the organization or organization’s personnel that may give them an edge when applying for the internship. This can be a crucial element during the interview process and may tip the scales in the individual student’s favor when decisions are being made.

With three “active” sites the students will progress toward securing an internship. This process may include communication between the student and the prospective internship site by a variety of mediums including: email; written correspondence; phone interviews; or face-to-face interviews. As part of the students’ professional preparation they are responsible for creating a variety of documents including: resume; cover letter; and creating a list of references. Most universities have professional career services that can help in this endeavor. The faculty member can also help with in-class instruction, advice, and the evaluating of these documents.

OTHER PREPARATIONS

Students must also be prepared for the interview. Mock interviews can be held as part of a class assignment. Appropriate dress and etiquette, especially for eating interviews or receptions, should also be a part of the instruction. Both dress and eating etiquette for interview setting can be integrated into the course syllabus. A variety of teaching protocols to prepare students for the interview process can be applied. Early in the semester the students can establish professional dress criteria through cooperative learning and norming. With input from the Career Services Center concerning appropriate dress for interviewing, the class selects the dress code for the semester. By dressing business casual and business professional throughout the semester, the students attain a comfort level that will aid them during the interview period. By participating in mock interviews, the students get to practice and observe themselves via videotape and improve upon their interview techniques. All of the above pre-professional activities help to prepare the students and better their odds of securing a quality internship.

BUILDING A DATABASE

As the semester progresses, the students will invariably reject some of their initial internship site selections for a variety of reasons. As internship sites are rejected, the students must replace them with new site selections always maintaining the three “active” sites. Rejected internship sites by one student may be an opportunity for another student in the class and, therefore, the students are encouraged to share with classmates’ information they have gathered on these rejected sites. This process of rejecting internship sites and adding new ones has several benefits. The students get to research further the opportunities available to them within the sports industry. Students practice communicating with professionals and enhance and increase their professional nomenclature. The networking that they do increases their contacts within the industry and lays the foundation for their job hunt which will proceed with the completion of their internship. Students gain confidence in their ability to interview and find opportunities within the sport industry. Students take ownership and responsibility of their own destiny and careers. Their negotiating strategies are improved upon as they compete for quality internships. The interaction with other classmates further strengthens these bonds and may lead to opportunities in the future. Many of the activates of the self-search process for internship may have both short-term and long-term rewards.

When a student accepts an internship they give a final two-minute presentation. Students describe the process by which the internship was secured. This further helps students who may be struggling with the process and have not yet secured an internship. The students who secured internship, describe the duties to be performed for the organization; any remuneration they will receive; and the potential benefit the internship will have on his future choice of career. This is a time to celebrate the achievement of the student and to have the student reflect upon his initial goals and objectives on the written POA. The faculty member should consult with the student prior to the final acceptance to determine if the internship is appropriate and will fulfill the university requirements while meeting the specific needs of the student. Students provide to the faculty advisor the appropriate paperwork and all pertinent internship supervisor information including: name; job title of supervisor; complete mailing address; and work phone number. The faculty member then contacts the internship supervisor and corroborates the details of internship information. Once all paperwork is signed by the appropriate university representatives and internship site representatives, the student is free to begin his internship.

After the student has accepted an internship, his other active contacts and discarded internship site selections should be retained to bolster the internship database for the remainder of the students and for future students. It is not uncommon for a class of approximately 25 students to generate well over 200 potential internship sites for future students. A strong database is a key element in aiding students with the self-search process. The database should be maintained, updated, and made available to students by the faculty member.

CURRENT RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

To date, 225 students have participated in the POA self-search method of obtaining an internship. The average number of active sites obtained before selecting an internship was 5.3. This means that, on average, students will contact more than five sites before finally selecting an internship. Of the 5.3 “active” sites students initially target, a little more than half, 2.8, are new or unique sites to the original internship site database. This tells us that students rely on the existing database for about half of their contacts. This 2.8 number of unique or new sites may also reflect the growing number of opportunities available to students seeking to perform an internships.

This internship self-search selection process was adopted in the fall of 1999 by our sport management program. Table 1 shows the student numbers and the success rate for students seeking an internship. To date, there have been 225 students to seek internship under the self-search process described above. The success rate has been 98.22 percent or, of the 225 students using the POA self-search method, 221 successfully obtained an internship in the semester of their choice. The first semester that students obtained internships under this process was the spring semester of 2000. Success was determined by students successfully securing internships in the semester of their choice. The year, semester, number of students seeking internships, number of students successfully obtaining internships in the semester of their choice, number of students unsuccessfully obtaining internships in the semester of their choice, and the percentage of successful outcomes is highlighted in Table 1.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The potential benefits of the internship experience for sport management students is clearly documented. The best method for students to obtain the internship is a challenging process for the sport management educator. Incorporating the internship search process into a capstone or seminar course in the student’s final semester of coursework appears to be an effective process. Employing the self-search process where the student incorporates goals and objectives

into a plan of action document gives the student the opportunity to reflect and concentrate his efforts into the particular sport field of his interest. Maintaining three “active” sites throughout the semester helped the student to develop needed networking skills and increases his likelihood of success. As a class assignment to be shared with peers, this effort can have an additive effect on successfully obtaining an internship for the desired semester and within the desired field. By evaluating progress throughout the semester, the sport management faculty member can become a partner in the internship site selection process. By maintaining a database on internship sites the faculty member can help facilitate the selection process. This method of internship site selection has had a great deal of success and could be employed successfully at other universities.

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Table 1

Student Success Rates

Year	# of students	# successfully obtaining internship	# unsuccessfully obtaining internship	% of success
2000	33	32	1	96.96
2001	38	38	0	100
2002	43	43	0	100
2003	40	39	1	97.5
2004	38	37	1	97.37
2005	33	32	1	96.96
Totals	225	221	4	98.22

*Two of the unsuccessful students above have since completed internship.

**Three students who completed internships had additional coursework to complete and two of those students have not yet graduated.

***One student did not successfully complete the internship and has still not graduated.