

Rethinking the Sport Management Internship

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Internships are widespread and usually a mandatory component of the student experience, but the focus on the employment experience may overshadow the educational function of experiential learning. This article argues for a shift in perspectives and priorities for career development in sport management curricula. While internships were originally seen as an effective means of preparing students for the sports industry, concerns over issues related to access and pedagogy have created an urgency to review practices across the discipline. The primary argument highlights an imbalance in the discourse surrounding professional and educational foci of sport management internships, changes in the understanding of careers since the adoption of internships in sport management, and design features that can be at odds with student development and motivation. Finally, we propose a more holistic approach and make recommendations for how rethinking internships can improve issues of equity, access, and student development.

Keywords: experiential learning, career development, motivation

Introduction

From its infancy the sport management curriculum was seen as a method for producing managers or employees for the sport industry (Chouinard, 1993; Parkhouse, 1987). The first programs focused on professional development, signaling the role of internships as a key component to facilitate the practical application of knowledge and create a bridge to employment (Parks, 1991). The sport management education literature has mostly adopted and reinforced this view of the curriculum, and especially the internship, as primarily focused

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on preparing students for sport industry jobs (Brown et al., 2016; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016).

The proliferation of internships has potentially helped the growth of sport management as an area of undergraduate study, but also led to a reliance in low-wage or no-wage supply of labor for sport organizations leading to other issues. This reliance has spurred criticisms of internships in recent years citing how the norm of unpaid internships tends to hold back those who cannot afford to work for free, while further benefitting people from more affluent and privileged backgrounds (Hora, 2022; Perlin, 2012; Walker et al., 2020). While this alone is a sufficiently significant prompting for sport management educators to reexamine their practices, there are several reasons that should motivate a shift in how internships are seen within the sport management curriculum and as a career development tool for students that we will speak to in this commentary. First, we argue that there is an imbalance in this discourse related to the professional and educational foci of sport management internships. Second, we identify the shift occurring in the understanding of careers since the early framework of sport management internships were set. And third, many design features of sport management internships are at odds with student development and motivation, which can lead to subpar outcomes.

An Imbalance in the Discourse— Rethinking the Focus of Internships

The sport management internship is often used to meet the narrow needs of industry, and the emphasis on career advancement as the primary goal of sport management internships has been a common theme within the literature (Brown et al., 2018). This is not surprising, as the formative years of the sport management curriculum overlapped with a shift across higher education in the United States towards students making decisions on college majors based on perceived economic returns and ability to land their first job (Hersh, 1997). Consequently, colleges have become more focused on providing courses that make students more marketable for their first jobs, and a growing tension has arisen between university programs that favor professional preparation versus a more liberal education (Hutton, 2006). These tensions tend to be reflected as a dichotomy between the theoretical and practical in education, with internships most often being touted as practical and as a gateway and transition point to industry (Hawzen & King-White, 2022). While the positioning of internships as a method of transitioning into industry has value, this view is often myopic and can neglect the broader learning and development opportunities that an internship could offer.

Critics of the current norms of sport management education, such as Newman (2014) and Hawzen and King-White (2022), argue that internships are just one aspect of the broader imbalance in sport management education, which tends to favor more technical business subjects that produce a labor force that meets (temporary) industry needs, over more broadly focused subjects that may better equip students to advance and change the industry. The internship, seen as an inherently practical experience with a primary emphasis on career advancement, is often discussed as the opposite of theory or having a broader and critical focus (Love et al., 2021). However, the perceived conflict between a professional or strictly career-minded educational focus and a broader, liberal education is misplaced and counterproductive. The internship is not antithetical to the idea of broad-based learning, but a useful enhancement of a liberal education.

The value of a broad-based education is particularly manifested by graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) MBA programs who tend to work in non-profits, showing the value of a general business education in preparing members of the workforce (Gasman & McMickens, 2010). An education is valuable, even if it does not yield employment in the traditional or perceived appropriate jobs in the field. The combination of professional education with liberal arts to promote individual betterment, that is, a liberal arts curriculum, with practical integrated dimensions can address many societal issues (Gasman & McMickens, 2010), including those that arise in the sport industry. Along those lines, Parker et al.'s (2016) examination of the effect of internships on GPA of students at liberal arts schools shows greater gains for students with low first-year GPA than those with higher grades earlier in their academic careers. There are positive effects on learning from internship experiences, particularly with students from Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI). This study suggests that "in addition to the seemingly widespread benefits of internships, the significant positive benefits of internship engagement may be most beneficial for those starting out in college with the lowest levels of academic achievement" (Parker et al., 2016, p. 108). This shows the value of the internship in the liberal arts environment, an environment that is often thought to eschew the idea of professional education.

Furthermore, the value of liberal education interwoven with experiential learning likely yields effective outcomes for students in underrepresented backgrounds in sport management. What we can learn in sport management from this approach is that liberal and professional education can coexist, and the internship can be a part of the broad-based liberal approach. We often view the liberal versus professional dichotomy as conflict in educational philosophies, yet a liberal education has many professional benefits. The value of a combined approach is further demonstrated in the annual National Association of Colleges

and Employers' (NACE; 2019) report that shows that employers rate critical thinking/problem solving, teamwork/collaboration, professionalism/work ethic, and oral/written communication as the top four career readiness competencies.

Calls within sport management for shifts in pedagogy toward more liberal or critical education that would directly impact practice have been present for some time (e.g., Frisby, 2005; Shaw et al., 2011). In some cases, these have come with direct recommendations pertaining to the sport management internship (Love et al., 2021; Newman, 2014). However, from the dominance of internships in sport management curricula (Eagleman & McNary, 2010), and how internships are discussed primarily with career goals in mind (e.g., Brown et al., 2016; King, 2009), and how sport management curricula tend to favor professional and business-focused categories for courses over ones centered on social subjects (Newman, 2014), we can see that sport management education, and particularly the discussion of the internship, continues to lean toward a primarily professional and career focus.

Colleges, as creators of social capital and mobility, demand that career education be taken seriously, and that resources and training are made available to assist students. However, as we have argued, a more broadly focused internship, striking a stronger balance with liberal education, in sport management would be more beneficial for students' development and their long-term career success, particularly given advancements in the understanding of careers explained in the next section.

The Relationship Between Internships and Careers

The nature of careers and factors that influence career success have evolved significantly since the early days of sport management education, and common internship models seemingly do not account for this. As sport management grew as a discipline in the 1990s, so too did a new framework for understanding how people progress through their work lives: the boundaryless career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). The concept of the boundaryless career reflects that both as a function of shifting economic circumstances and the changing attitudes of individuals, the norm for careers is that they are less likely to be contained within or dictated by a single organization in a hierarchical manner. Instead, careers unfold across several employers and are supported by external professional networks and personal circumstances (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Inkson et al., 2012).

The complexities of preparing for modern careers are seen through statistics that show that workers in the United States average 4.2 years with a single employer (BLS, 2022), and through examinations of work identity transitions across jobs, organizations, and types of work (Epstein, 2019; Ibarra, 1999; Rose & Ogas, 2018). Accordingly, research on college students' careers tends to recommend against early specialization, and for a balance between acquiring

more general/baseline and more specific/technical skills while in school to be better equipped for a career that will have a strong chance of deviating from a students' undergraduate college major (Bear & Skorton, 2019; Malamud, 2010). The reasons for why careers tend to unfold unpredictably are varied. People may decide to not stay working in the same field because of changes in their interests (i.e., personal factors) or due to (often negative) work-relevant experiences, but contextual factors like financial constraints and social supports are relevant for many (Lent et al., 2002).

In sport management, studies of alumni and industry professionals provide compelling evidence that careers in sport are often boundaryless, and possibly more so than many other fields. In a study of graduates from a British program, Minten and Forsyth (2014) observed that about half of them were working in a position unrelated to sport a decade after graduation. Another study of professionals with between five and 15 years of experience found that the average job and organizational tenure in the sample were 23 and 30 months respectively, and that 63% of the people in the sample had changed job sectors (e.g., moving from a college sport job to a nonprofit sport job) during their career, and a large proportion of people in the sample were recorded changing between jobs in and out of the sport industry (Odio & Kerwin, 2017).

Internships can serve a vital role in helping prepare for careers that contain multiple transitions and unexpected turns, including beyond the sport industry. They can be a space for the type of experimentation and “identity play” described by Ibarra (1999; Ibarra & Obodaru, 2020; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), which contributes to the development and evolution of a professional identity but runs counter to the idea of using internships as primarily résumé-building endeavors and try-outs that students feel pressured to treat as career-defining moments (Hawzen & King-White, 2022). Although a heavily emphasized feature of internships in sport management is their influence on career decision making (Odio et al., 2014), this is typically far too narrow in scope (i.e., just for sport industry jobs) and often with the underlying motivation of meeting perceived sport industry needs (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016). Moreover, sport management internships are situated in a context that perpetuates an imbalance of power, gives students incentives to conform rather than experiment, and often provides more consistent benefits for sport management programs than for students (Hawzen & King-White, 2022; Newman, 2014; Walker et al., 2020).

The nature of contemporary careers has changed in a way where they are not linear or predictable. Most people will change their area of work and even work in fields unrelated to their major during their career. While internships are a useful learning experience, they should not be viewed as a purely career-focused experience. Balancing learning the specific technical aspects of the internship

site with broader-focused learning objectives would help in previewing the area of work and giving them more sustainable longer-term skills.

Internships within Sport Management Curricula

The typical current positioning of internships within the varying sport management curricula conflicts with the realities of student experiences, motivations, and early career development. Although many programs have expanded and adapted their internship and related field experience courses, the full-semester, senior-level internship earning 11 or more credits appears to be the dominant form (Brown et al., 2016). While this has its own consequences, there are several important factors that undermine the intent of nearly all internships, mandatory or not.

There is no doubt that for many students the senior internship will provide a timely opportunity to apply knowledge, increase their network, further their skills, and transition into their career; however, the visible successes of such students has likely led to the crafting of a misleading prototypical idealization of student development and the attribution of their success to the internship model. As highlighted by recent scholars, the internship experience can be far from ideal for many students (Hawzen & King-White, 2022; Walker et al., 2020; Wiest & King-White, 2013). Leaving aside issues of access, powerlessness, discrimination, and sexual harassment that are part of the internship experience for some, as a career-focused experience the design of internships often takes a one-size-fits-all approach that is formed by industry practitioners and university faculty members with limited student input, if any (Hora et al., 2020). This tends to mean students, when not otherwise constrained by logistical factors, approach internships as a means of gaining an advantage in the labor market rather than learning (Hora et al., 2020), which even leaves students who are not required to complete internships feeling pressured to conform to labor market expectations (Hawzen et al., 2018). Moreover, internship courses and policies are often designed with an idealized and mythical “average” student in mind, missing the intricacies of students with varying abilities, backgrounds, and stage of professional development (Odio & McLeod, 2021; Odio et al., 2022). In terms of development, the heavily career-focused senior internship may be out of sync with students who do not fit within what is considered a typical trajectory, such as those who are not interested in a career in sport, or those at a different extreme who may have already amassed significant work and internship experience and for whom an additional internship to satisfy an academic requirement would be redundant or even get in the way of a full-time job offer.

The clash between the design of internships and the needs and motivations of students is also apparent through accounts of what students look for in internships.

Research on students' search behavior for internships shows that students' focus is often less on their career interests, and more so on logistical factors (i.e., location, timing, and costs), undercutting the notion that an internship is an effective springboard for a career path for all students (Hora, 2022; Odio, 2017). Studies in sport management have highlighted the mechanisms through which people change their career plans during their internship (Odio & Kerwin, 2016; Odio et al., 2014), showing that even for many students for whom the capstone internship would appear to line up perfectly with their career trajectory, they may lose interest during the semester and the intense career focus means they will have limited gains. Often students performing internships learn that they do not want to work in that specific sector of the industry, or in some instances give up on working in sport (Odio et al., 2014). While this can certainly be valuable, it falls short of the potential gains of teaching broadly focused, transferable skills that could recruit and maintain the interest of students throughout the internship.

Recommendations

The prevailing approach to internships in sport management education is falling short of meeting the needs of all students. The dominant career-focused internship practices do not account for students' diverse motivations or their career and developmental needs. Moreover, these practices and the related discourse found in the literature are contributing to norms that are pressuring students into unnecessarily difficult situations that exacerbate inequalities and undercut the underlying goals of the internship. Importantly, this is not to say that internships should be devoid of challenges or not accurately resemble an authentic workplace, but that the confluence of certain academic policies, industry labor market norms, and expectations creates an internship experience that does not consistently provide all students with the type of developmental experiences that internships can be. We suggest a recalibration of the focus of the sport management internship to integrate the learning experience in a more broad-based, yet practical way that is in line with the realities that students face by incorporating more inclusive and accessible learning designs. This recalibration consists of the following recommendations:

First, we recommend making curricular design choices based on the desired learning outcomes. This may include pushing back against norms to include a compulsory full-time internship and embracing other models and High-Impact Practices (Zilvinskis et al., 2022) that complement the educational experience. From a curriculum and learning design perspective, the delivery system (e.g., in person, online, internship, lab) should be decided only after many other facets about the course or lesson (Dick et al., 2005). In sport management there has been an apparent, collective, and rarely challenged decision that an internship must be

a part of the curriculum. As advocated by Hawzen & King-White (2022), internships should be elective, and what counts as an internship should be expanded to allow students to collect a wider range of experience. The decision of where to perform an internship can be flexible such that hybrid models, completely remote, episodic shadowing, and the traditional face-to-face internship can be integrated into the curriculum. We must remember that the work experience of the internship is not the only facet of the course, and that encouraging broad, interdisciplinary experiences and focus on skills can help create a stronger foundation for long-term career success (Bear & Skorton, 2019; Epstein, 2019).

Second, we urge the sport management education community to shift the discourse around internships and expand the language to balance dominant industry-focused rhetoric with a stronger emphasis on cultivating more transferable and transformational skills. Part of this shift must be the confrontation of the relationship between sport management education and the sport industry. Several scholars have highlighted the ways in which sport management education is serving industry needs and even prioritizing it over students' needs (Hawzen et al., 2018; Newman, 2014). Whereas, indeed, a move toward a more critical and transformational focus for sport management internships, and overall pedagogy, would help students develop into stronger professionals that challenge industry norms and practices and advance the field (Frisby, 2005; Newman, 2014; Shaw et al., 2011). Reshaping the language used around sport management internships is not likely to be immediate, but continuing to call attention to this topic can eventually shift how internships are presented and discussed in scholarly literature, within program curricular discussions, and in marketing materials and course descriptions for sport management programs. This process should involve research on innovative practices, and more intentional sharing of knowledge and practices across programs related to experiential education and all instruction.

Third, a shift is needed in the role that internship sites have in learning and how they are evaluated. Current norms pressure students to consider the prestige or brand name appeal of certain internship sites as they are perceived to increase the competitive edge in the job market for the students that complete that internship (Walker et al., 2020). As location, timing, and cost are already prioritized by students seeking internships (Hora, 2022; Odio, 2017), it is apparent that learning or even interest is not top of mind for many students. For students, the internship site may be an ideal space for networking and career advancement, or it could simply be a means to an end (i.e., fulfilling graduation requirements). However, the internship site could better serve the student, and perhaps the host organization, as a space for experimentation and play (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010).

The current position of the internship as a labor market tool and curricular requirement pressures students into roles and actions that may be questionable

(Hawzen & King-White, 2022; Wiest & King-White, 2013). Risks are inherently discouraged in favor of compliance to academic requirements and organizational leaders, thus thwarting much of the potential growth that could come from trying new things and learning from failures and mistakes. These issues could be remedied by shifting away from seeing the internship as primarily a source of labor or career stepping-stone and toward being a space for learning and experimentation. While part of this is a larger issue with sport industry labor practices, changes to how internships are positioned from an educational standpoint could be impactful. Related to the prior recommendation, students should be coached to approach internships as an opportunity to critique practices, not just observe and absorb.

Academic internship assignments could facilitate these critiques and encourage building and making connections to broader skills and students' personal interests. Shifting the mindset of students to value what they will learn rather than just what they can put on their résumé would make the experience more inclusive and engaging, and mitigate issues of misaligned or changing career preferences since the focus would be less on career outcomes and more on learning (Odio et al., 2022).

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