

# Creating a Collaborative Teaching Culture: The Case Study of the Value of a Professional Learning Community

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In sport management higher education, doctoral students and early-career faculty are often tasked with teaching university courses, yet the training and support rarely match the demands of the job. This article explores the utility of a professional learning community (PLC) within a sport management department at an American university using a case study methodology. A PLC creates space for colleague collaboration among faculty with similar objectives and goals. The PLC examined in this article includes a mix of experienced (i.e., associate and full professors) and inexperienced professors (i.e., assistant professors and doctoral students) sharing their classroom/instructional experience at the undergraduate and master's levels. PLCs represent a viable solution to help ease the classroom transition for early-career instructors and provide a platform for faculty to seek advice related to challenges. Findings suggest that the proper implementation of PLCs can lead to perceived increases in teaching effectiveness, self-efficacy, and collaboration among experienced and inexperienced faculty. Other benefits of PLCs include allowing faculty members to remain attuned to current classroom trends and maintaining a common philosophical mission/vision for the degree program.

Keywords: doctoral education, teaching effectiveness, self-efficacy, professional development

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## Introduction

Sport management academic programs are often among the most prevalent and popular programs on college campuses. There is an ongoing need for quality educators in sport management with more than 600 programs in North America alone (Degrees in Sports, 2023). A faculty member who provides engaging class sessions that effectively use high-impact practices to achieve student learning outcomes is highly desired. Yet, many faculty members may have limited pedagogical background, experience, or training within sport management. Likewise, senior faculty may not have opportunities to update and improve their teaching with the changing technologies or learning styles of students, potentially not meeting the needs of their students. Thus, how a faculty member or prospective faculty member (doctoral student) can obtain the knowledge and skills necessary to improve their teaching is a critical topic for the academy.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are common in other academic disciplines and could be beneficial for sport management faculty and doctoral students (Gonçalves et al., 2022). The overarching goal of a learning community is to create a space for collaboration among individuals with similar goals in their professional work. Learning communities encourage sharing ideas of successful and unsuccessful practices in the job, as well as provide members an opportunity to request and share advice related to unforeseen circumstances they encounter at work. Therefore, through a case study approach, the purpose of this article is to discuss the implementation and impact of a faculty PLC in a sport management program on faculty's teaching self-efficacy.

## Literature Review

### Faculty Education and Pedagogical Opportunities

The path to a sport management faculty position often requires a doctoral degree in sport management or a related discipline. Sport management doctoral students are typically trained in program curriculum steeped in research-based methodology, statistics, and content-specific, theory-driven courses (James,

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2017). Doctoral students receive varied levels of education in teaching prior to their first classroom teaching experience. This preparation may range from formal pedagogically focused coursework, mentorship, or teaching assistantship experience. Universities rely on graduate teaching assistants to be full-time instructors and often have broad, non-discipline-specific training or workshops. Some doctoral students have opportunities to teach physical activity courses (e.g., bowling, jogging), where they can hone their classroom management or communication skills, but limited opportunities to employ pedagogical in-class activities to translate to a traditional classroom experience (e.g., Ferris & Perrewé, 2014). Other programs allow students to teach lower- or upper-level sport management-specific courses.

As faculty members, professors may have limited opportunities to continue to learn and improve in pedagogy specific to the sport management discipline in a customized and formalized environment. Universities frequently offer seminars or centers for teaching and learning; however, it may not be discipline specific. Additionally, they may not answer questions or provide strategies in real time when teaching or facing challenges within the classroom. Within an academic program, opportunities to share or improve teaching strategies among sport management faculty on a frequent basis may be constrained because of lack of time due to research or service demands. Beyond the classroom, ancillary materials and opportunities to grow as an educator may sometimes be limited. Textbooks on pedagogical instruction in sport management are scarce (e.g., Gentile, 2010; Rayner & Webb, 2021) or focused on managing internship/experiential experiences (e.g., Ammon et al., 2010; Brown & Dollar, 2017). The *Sport Management Education Journal*, Commission on Sport Management (COSMA) conference, and Teaching and Learning Fairs at conferences (e.g., North American Society for Sport Management or Sport Marketing Association) remain some of the few outlets for learning specifics to the pedagogical needs within the sport management discipline. Although there has been an increase in research on pedagogy within doctoral programs (e.g., female doctoral student perspectives, Johnson & Beasley, 2022), there is limited discussion on the pedagogical training of doctoral students within sport management or opportunities for faculty to improve their teaching styles.

The rise of sport management programs across universities internationally has coincided with an increase in education-focused research articles on the topic (Yiamouyiannis et al., 2013). Miragaia and Soares (2017) conducted a systematic review of 98 sport management higher education-related articles from 1974–2014, determining eight themes (Curriculum and Knowledge; Internship, Experiential Learning, and Service Learning; Employability; Pedagogy; Gender; Technology and e-Learning; Globalization and Internationalization; and Accreditation

Process and Quality). The area of pedagogy was only moderately examined. Since that review, many of these major themes have continued in *Sport Management Education Journal's* latest issues (e.g., international teaching, Davies & Ströbel, 2022; employment, Lubisco et al., 2019; internships, McClean et al., 2020; education in the COVID-era, Rayner & Webb, 2021; Saliofsky et al., 2022). However, because the day-to-day aspects of teaching—such as activities and assignments or managing students—is underwhelmingly studied, PLCs may be an opportunity for faculty to continue to develop as instructors. PLCs represent an area of sport management education and pedagogy that is underdeveloped from a research perspective. It also is unclear how frequently PLCs are used across sport management academia. This case study illustrates how the fostering of learning communities can be a useful strategy for both new and experienced instructors.

### Professional Learning Communities

PLCs have been implemented in educational settings in both K–12 and post-secondary environments (Roy & Hord, 2006). According to Stoll et al. (2006), a PLC is broadly defined as “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Toole & Louis, 2002), operating as a collective enterprise (King & Newmann, 2001)” (p. 233). PLCs can occur digitally or in-person, and they are often a consistent part of the organization’s operations as the discussion has localized context. The PLC allows for open reflection, with a group that has established a shared vision, goals, and sense of responsibility toward students (Olsson, 2019).

Research suggests that PLCs improve student learning outcomes at the K-12 level (Burns et al., 2018). In addition to increased student success, PLCs positively impact the participating faculty members (Hudson et al., 2013; Olsson, 2019). For instance, teachers who engage in PLCs have shown a willingness to create change in their pedagogical practices (Gee & Whaley, 2016). This is particularly important as research suggests that seasoned faculty members are offered limited resources to assist in changing teaching practices. Further, PLCs create a culture of collaboration instead of isolation among staff members (Woodland, 2016). Lastly, research indicates that PLCs can lead to increased self-efficacy (Mintzes et al., 2013), which is especially pertinent to newer faculty. The effectiveness of PLCs in teaching has been researched since the 1990s (Hord, 1997; Olsson, 2019). Despite the positive outcomes associated with PLCs generally, they have been underutilized and under-researched within sport management pedagogy. Therefore, discussion around the implementation and effectiveness of PLCs in sport management departments is warranted.

## Conceptual Framework: Self-Efficacy

To understand the effect of the PLC on sport management faculty, this study is framed to examine instructors' self-efficacy around teaching constructs, or teaching efficacy. Self-efficacy is a personal belief in one's capacity to accomplish specific tasks and behaviors (Bandura, 1997). Bandura (1977) argues that self-efficacy is key to the learning process, and that higher levels of self-efficacy lead to better performance and increased feelings of competence. The link of self-efficacy to improved learning outcomes may be related to the effects of self-efficacy on behavior and thought processes. Specifically, self-efficacy is positively correlated with personal resilience and perseverance, and increased self-efficacy leads to increased positive thoughts about one's ability to complete different tasks (Bandura, 1986).

Based on Bandura's (1977) definition of self-efficacy, teacher efficacy is a teacher's belief in their "capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001, p. 783). Teaching efficacy can also include the confidence in the lecturer duties required. Sharp et al. (2013) outlines the lecturer duties as tutorials (tasks associated with students), lectures and seminars (tasks associated with delivering lectures), and assessment (tasks associated with designing assessments/exams/assignments). Teaching efficacy is linked to innovation and enthusiasm in the classroom, persistence and perseverance during teaching challenges, and student achievement (Burton et al., 2005). Thus, the concepts of self-efficacy as it relates to teaching (i.e., teaching efficacy) have been studied across educational settings (e.g., Fabriz et al., 2021; Pressley & Ha, 2021; Renbarger & Davis 2019; Yoo, 2016). PLCs, in particular, due to the collaborative nature of the learning, have been found to increase teacher efficacy (Anderson & Olivier, 2022). Therefore, through a case study approach, the purpose of this article is to discuss the implementation and impact of a faculty PLC in a sport management program on faculty's teaching self-efficacy.

## Methodology

### Case Background

#### *Institution Overview*

Our academic program and its sport management faculty PLC served as the case for this study. Georgia State University is a research-intensive urban institution with 50,000+ undergraduate students. The university is consistently lauded for its "unusually strong commitment to undergraduate teaching" (#1 public institution in 2022 *US News & World Report*), consistently ranked as the #2

best undergraduate teaching and #2 most innovative college or university (2022 *US News & World Report*), and frequently awards the most bachelor's degrees to African-American students in the US (*Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, 2022). Thus, the mission and vision of the program and instructors aligned with the teaching goals of the institution. The sport management program is housed in the College of Education and Human Development within the Department of Kinesiology and Health. The Sport Administration degree program offers undergraduate degrees in Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies in Sport Administration (since 2016, approximately 100 current students), Master in Sport Administration (since 1985, approximately 75 current students), and PhD in Kinesiology with a concentration in Sport Administration (since 2016, three current students). At the time of the study, the program was comprised of five full-time faculty members (three tenure-track and two clinical), two doctoral student instructors of records, and four part-time instructors.

## Participants

Six sport administration instructors, the authors of this paper, of varying ranks (doctoral students, junior faculty, senior faculty) voluntarily created and participated in the PLC (see Table 1). We had differing teaching experiences (three first-year instructors and three with experience) and taught on either the graduate or undergraduate levels. The two doctoral students were independent instructors of record for upper-level core sport administration undergraduate courses. All first-year instructors for the institution were teaching new course preps.

**Table 1. Professional Learning Community Participants**

Participant Rank (N = 6)	Gender	Race/Ethnic Identity	Total Years Teaching	Year Teaching at Current Institution	2022-23 Teaching Load
PhD Student/Instructor of Record	Woman	White	1	1st	1/1
PhD Student/Instructor of Record	Man	White	1	1st	1/1
Limited Term Clinical Assistant Professor (Untenured)	Woman	Black/African American	1	1st	4/4
Assistant Professor (Untenured)	Woman	White	5	1st	1/2
Associate Professor (Tenured)	Man	White	14	8th	0/1
Professor (Tenured)	Woman	White	19	16th	2/2

## Structure of the PLC Program

The PLC was set up as monthly collaborative teaching roundtables, where we discussed our teaching styles, acclimation to the classroom, best practices, and challenges. We utilized a conference room space without computers or other technology to encourage focused and attentive discussion from all members. The informal program consisted of eight sessions, one per month for the fall and spring academic year. Each session contained 1–2 hours of discussion (see Table 2) and began with participants describing a high point and a low/challenge from their last month. The highlights included class sessions or activities that were “wins” (e.g., a positive class activity or interaction with a student, implementation of a previously discussed idea, or successful resolution of an issue). From there, discussions were open, with newer faculty presenting their questions or classroom challenges first, followed by the rest. All participants provided input. There was no formal agenda or topic to discuss each meeting; rather, the topics were created organically based on the conversation. The sessions were distinct from program meetings or department faculty meetings due to their mission-focused goal to provide a forum to discuss teaching and inclusion of doctoral students. A program coordinator organized the meetings with calendar invitations and the only formal moderation was keeping the group on time, starting and ending the meeting, and opening the floor for the discussion. All participants attended each meeting except for one absence.

## Measures and Analysis

All authors on this paper were the members of the PLC, completed data collection, and participated in reflexive discussions during data analysis. We used quantitative and qualitative feedback to better understand the impact on each instructor. To gain an understanding of faculty confidence and self-efficacy, all members of the PLC completed self-assessments during the PLC (pre, mid, post) using the Teaching Item Subscale (22 items) of the Lecturer Self-Efficacy Questionnaire (Sharp et al., 2013). The survey measured confidence in performing teaching tasks covering three factors: tutorials (five items; e.g., facilitating student discussion in class, consulting with students), lectures and seminars (five items; e.g., preparing handout, delivering lectures, using e-learning), and assessment (12 items; e.g., designing assessment, preparing assignments/exams). The items were set on a 0–9 scale from *Not Confident* to *Completely Confident* ( $\alpha = .90-.97$  on the three subscales). At the end of the academic year, we responded to a single-item, open-ended survey to capture our main takeaways from the experience (i.e., “describe your main takeaways from the experience in the learning community”).

**Table 2. Suggested Agenda and Topics**

Suggested Agenda for One-Hour Session; One Session Per Month	
Start of Meeting (:15)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each faculty, in turn, identifies their teaching high and low over the past month</li> <li>• General questions from the group before starting the discussion</li> </ul>
Middle of Meeting (:35)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New faculty pose questions or issues in their classroom</li> <li>• Discussion around the topics introduced</li> <li>• Senior faculty pose questions or issues in their classroom</li> <li>• Discussion around the topics introduced</li> </ul>
End of Meeting (:10)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final thoughts and recap</li> <li>• Identify personal teaching goals for the next month (optional)</li> <li>• Schedule next meeting</li> </ul>
Sample Discussion Topics	
<i>Topics</i>	<i>Specific Examples of Conversation Starters</i>
In-Class Activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successful and unsuccessful classroom activities</li> <li>• Group brainstorm for in-class activities for upcoming topics</li> <li>• Discussion around the group’s professional network for potential guest speakers</li> </ul>
Classroom Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Best practices to managing group project conflict</li> <li>• Strategies to manage a disruptive or unresponsive student</li> </ul>
Grading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation of students in a group setting</li> <li>• Establishing an effective rubric</li> <li>• Evaluation of participation grades</li> <li>• Balance of efficiency and providing thoughtful feedback</li> </ul>
Logistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarification of key academic dates or policies</li> <li>• Administrative requests</li> <li>• Identifying outstanding students for scholarships and awards</li> <li>• Course scheduling for upcoming semesters</li> </ul>



The quantitative data was averaged based on each factor (tutorials, lectures and seminars, and assessment) for each participant, then grouped for time 1 (pre), time 2 (mid), and time 3 (end). The average percent change in self-efficacy on each of the three factors from each point in time was utilized to understand impact of the PLC, as well as the maximum percentage change by an individual. We analyzed the qualitative data following Hsieh and Shannon's (2005) approach to conventional content analysis. The lead researcher first closely read the qualitative data and constructed initial codes directly from the text. These codes were then sorted into thematic categories. Categories were then discussed with other members of the research team, who were the members of the PLC, to bring in various perspectives and interpretations based on our individual identities (see Table 1), which led to a consensus of the three finalized categories (Graneheim et al., 2017). These reflexive discussions added trustworthiness to the qualitative data analysis, as it resulted in investigator triangulation of the data while acknowledging our various positionalities (Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2016).

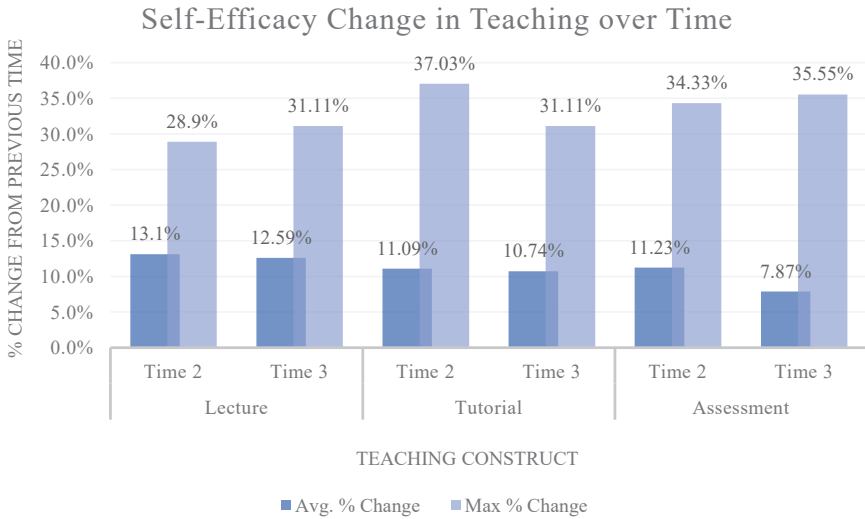
## Findings and Discussion

The group showed confidence in managing different teaching situations. We found that there was improvement in each of the three teaching areas. Scores improved on average 22.8% (2.1 on the 9-point scale) in overall teaching self-confidence from the first survey to the end-of-the-year survey. The instructors also showed improvement on each of the three teaching areas, from the start (Time 1) to the midpoint (Time 2), and midpoint to the end of the year (Time 3; Figure 1). Some individuals saw great growth, as noted in the maximum percentage of change, with one improving 31.1% from the midpoint to the end of semester in their lecture ability, another with improvement of 37.7% in comfort level with Tutorials from the beginning of the year to the midpoint, and another from 35.5% from the midpoint to end of the year in Assessments. Because the PLC allowed faculty the freedom and forum to bring forth discussion topics they were unsure about in real time each month, it may have led to more knowledge on how to address that area and thus increased confidence in those specific areas.

The statistical findings were supported by our qualitative findings. We constructed three categories from the qualitative data: (1) opportunity to innovate with teaching tactics; (2) passing of program, procedural, and institutional knowledge; and (3) morale and team building.

### Opportunity to Innovate with Teaching Tactics

A benefit of the community was, as one junior faculty member noted, the “new and innovative teaching strategies” discussed. Specifically, teaching strategies to



**Figure 1. Changes in lecturer self-efficacy during the professional learning community.**

engage students were frequently discussed. Instructors of various ranks chimed in with unique, transferrable strategies to get learners to actively participate in classes. In one session, a faculty member described grouping students to brainstorm answers to sport management situations, while having students write answers on the whiteboard to display answers. Another discussed the same idea but incorporated the use of Jamboard or Kahoot! The pros and cons of the methods were described, and one senior faculty member noted the PLCs “inspired me to try new activities in the classroom after more than a decade of teaching.” Some tried these ideas and reported back in the next session about the success (or flop, where something did not go as planned, such as an unforeseen student comment that may have influenced the activity) depending on the strategy and implementation. Another senior faculty member noted the PLC allowed them to be “more introspective than normal” about the teaching process. Everything from best practices for online or in-person exam distribution to how to end a class discussion that has become derailed were discussed, and various ideas were considered.

### Passing of Program, Procedural, and Institutional Knowledge

Passing of university and program-related procedural information was another common benefit of the community. The PLC “helped me discuss logistical hurdles I was facing,” noted one doctoral student, as topics such as how to

manage plagiarism, cheating, and new AI (e.g., ChatGPT) became points of discussion. These discussions were beneficial because it allowed senior faculty and program coordinators to provide the philosophical and logistical direction the program should move forward on various program-wide decisions, as they were happening in real time. For example, the usage of AI by students emerged during the PLC and prompted the subsequent need for program best practices and policies to ensure consistency across the program. Other university-related policies, such as medical or hardship withdrawals, disruptive student policy, and drop/add procedures were discussed as the instructors faced students in need of assistance in one or more classes across the program. This also allowed consistency in messaging to students, as well as aiding both the instructors and students quickly to resolve any issues, and confidence to answer future questions on the topics. The PLC “provided a monthly outlet for all of these challenges.”

## Morale and Team Building

The PLC gave instructors a sense of community, as one senior instructor explained, “we are in this together.” A junior faculty stated the PLC helped them feel like we are “not alone” in the teaching process, but rather part of the larger sport administration unit preparing future sport management professionals. Another junior faculty member noted the group “supported my professional development and sense of belonging as a faculty member” and a doctoral student thought it “helped facilitate a connection between the PhD students and the faculty.” It also provided an opportunity for expressing feelings about the teaching process, ranging from excitement to nervousness to frustration or disappointment. Finally, one junior faculty member noted that

many times in academia we get bogged down in the challenges of the classroom; however, this learning community also gave us all space to discuss the good from teaching and the fun we have in the classroom—a reminder of one of the reasons we got into the profession in the first place!

## Summary

The PLC was very well received by our instructors with satisfaction of the time spent. One doctoral student noted the value of their experience, saying, “I really enjoyed the professional learning community,” while a junior faculty member “looked forward to meeting in this group and at times wish it met more often.” Because of the format, participants stated that it served as a “great space to connect with the faculty/instructors” and was a “helpful experience ... as a young instructor.” The sessions allowed instructors to seek advice and raise concerns

or areas of frustration and pride. This outlet for information may improve self-efficacy in teaching, which, in turn, could allow the instructors to enjoy the teaching experience. All indicated a desire to participate in the program again the following year.

## Recommendations for Program Administration and Faculty

The purpose of this article is to discuss the implementation and impact of a faculty PLC in a sport management program on faculty's teaching self-efficacy. The quantitative results clearly show an overall average increase of our group's self-efficacy around teaching constructs, suggesting the PLC did increase our teaching efficacy. These results were further supported by qualitative findings. We explored new teaching strategies, and felt more confident attempting new strategies in the classroom, both in learning new institutional knowledge and in knowing we had a place to process these teaching moments in the PLC. We left the PLC more confident in our abilities to handle challenges in the classroom, as well as with enthusiasm to try new teaching approaches, both components of enhanced teaching efficacy (Burton et al., 2005) Furthermore, aside from increase in self-efficacy around teaching, we also collectively experienced a sense of team morale from being a part of the PLC.

Thus, while the initial intention of the PLC was to provide an environment for doctoral students to learn about the teaching process, the PLC proved to be a beneficial environment for all levels of our faculty, from doctoral students to senior faculty members. As such, we contend a PLC would benefit sport management programs regardless of whether they have doctoral students. An efficient monthly meeting where ideas are shared about teaching strategies or styles helps faculty members stay attuned to trends, keeps the program on the same philosophical page, and may improve morale, in addition to instructor self-efficacy. The PLC differs from traditional faculty meetings in that it is an open dialogue and discussion-based meeting, without a formal agenda, as well as active participation of doctoral students. The topic of each PLC in our case study was variable and driven by the faculty and their questions or challenges at that moment. The moderator of the PLC was a program coordinator, but given the open nature of the PLC, did not have a formalized agenda.

For programs with doctoral students or onboarding new faculty members, the PLC was a space to examine the training of instructors. As one senior faculty member noted, it was "instrumental in helping our program think about how we introduce our new students and faculty into teaching" to create better strategies to avoid throwing our first-time instructors "to the wolves." While a traditional pedagogical course could cover many of the topics discussed in our PLC, the various vantage points resulting from all of the faculty members meeting and

providing insights into every problem or question raised proved to be advantageous for our group. Doctoral programs could add PLCs as part of year 3 or 4 of the program to coincide with the doctoral students' first semesters of teaching.

The PLC also provided a place for faculty to connect. In the ever-growing digital world and online classes, this monthly meeting gave faculty a chance to see each other in person and build the community in a way that was different than a traditional faculty meeting. This may be especially important for online programs, where faculty do not see each other as frequently. In a landscape where time is valuable and meetings can often be inefficient, this monthly meeting provided an opportunity to give faculty confidence and strategies to mitigate potential problems, while serving the institutional goals of effective education. Finally, being a faculty member allows for freedom for the individual to manage their class and time; because of the nature of the profession, it can be isolating if the faculty is not large in numbers. A PLC may play a role in faculty job satisfaction, which, in turn, may influence job commitment or faculty retention. In programs where there are only 1-2 sport management faculty members, a PLC could be created with other sport management faculty virtually. For example, sport management faculty from a peer institution may face similar classroom challenges and be able to discuss ideas.

While this study was limited to one case, future research on PLCs may include larger programs compared to smaller programs, part-time instructors, or focus on specific parts of teaching (e.g., solely on Assessments). Additionally, the impact of the PLCs on students in the classrooms of instructors would be important to consider. Overall, a PLC may be an outlet for faculty to gain the confidence needed to enjoy teaching. The value in our approach may serve as a model for other sport management programs.

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