

An Evaluation of Sport Management Student Preparedness: Recommendations for Adapting Curriculum to Meet Industry Needs

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Experiential learning has become a driving force of universities around the world, and is a crucial part of many sport management programs. This is particularly true given the competitive nature of the field and the rapid changes the industry continuously faces. This work seeks to reexamine the sport management curricula to ensure a progression and evolution toward a superior level of student preparedness for their internship experiences. Through the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, our major findings recommend a focus on academic, experiential, and professional development. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed along with limitations and directions for further investigation.

Keywords: curriculum, experiential learning, internship, sport management

Prompted by the 2008 recession in the United States, deep cuts in higher education spending have caused tuition increases and have negatively affected the quality of an academic education by way of larger class sizes and fewer course offerings (Oliff, Palacios, Johnson, & Leachman, 2013). Powell, Johnson, Anderson, and Paisley (2013) argue that “higher education is falling under intense scrutiny for its rigor and relevance” and thus universities and faculty “must find ways to make our ‘product’—our students—more valuable, and we must ‘produce’ them in more efficient ways” (p. 5). Further, the present economic climate in the U.S. features a depressed job market, a reality that has intensified concerns regarding the “employment value of a college degree” (Grasgreen, 2013). Accordingly, due to the desire to facilitate and deliver a high quality preparatory academic experience to better position students for future career opportunities, field experiences and internships have become the driving force of many universities around the world (Kuh, 2008; O’Neill, 2010; Rosenstein, Sweeney, & Gupta, 2012). They are often perceived to be “a bridge between the culture of the classroom and the world of work” (Eyler, 1995, p. 186). For example, the authors’ U.S.-based university lists internships and experiential learning opportunities as one of its key institutional priorities within its strategic plan through the year 2020.

The focus on experiential learning is not a new one, however, and has proved particularly important for future sport management professionals (e.g., Cuneen, 2004; Moorman, 2004; Stier, 2002), given the saturated, highly competitive nature of the industry. Not only are there currently 380 undergraduate programs granting degrees in the sport management field in the U.S. (North American Society for Sport Management, 2014), but there are also highly qualified applicants for competitive jobs from a variety of other academic disciplines, such as business and public health-oriented majors. Furthermore, the field itself does not always value a sport management degree (King, 2009). A Turnkey Sports Poll featured in the *Sports Business Journal* discovered sport industry executives would favor candidates with a business degree (48%) over a sport management degree (34%), and believe that internship opportunities are the most important element of a sport management program (King, 2009). Thus, it is imperative that sport management programs facilitate experiential learning opportunities that will best prepare students with the appropriate skill set for a sport-related job in their futures.

However, it is worth noting that there have been some laudable critiques of the internship as a learning tool because of both ethical (Wiest & King-White, 2013) and legal (Greenhouse, 2013) criticisms regarding the potential exploitation of the individuals involved in these experiences. Of late, the use and legality of these required opportunities have been scrutinized, particularly in the wake of the lawsuit brought against Fox Searchlight Pictures by two unpaid production assistants (Greenhouse, 2013). The ruling was in favor of the interns and called the responsibilities/use of the role of “intern” into question,

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consequently bringing up many points of discussion within the context of a university-supported internship. While these concerns do need to be addressed, and constantly critiqued, they do not alleviate the increased focus that many universities are placing on incorporating experiential learning opportunities into curricula and degree programs. As such, there is greater responsibility for faculty to ensure that students are both competitive and prepared as they matriculate and enter the labor force. Therefore, the aims of this work are to: (a) critically evaluate sport management student preparedness, and (b) make recommendations for how to further the progression of student professionalism and preparedness to enter the sport industry.

Literature Review

Findings suggest that field experience aids in preparation for work in the sport industry (Sotiriadou, 2011). Graduates tend to be positive about their internship experiences, and many considered it to be the most important element of their undergraduate education due to the practical nature of the experience and/or the career boost received from the line item on their resume (Eyler, 1995). Jones, Brooks, and Mak (2008) noted that 86% of sport management programs across the United States have mandatory internship credits incorporated into their curriculum. However there is a dearth of literature examining the role of sport management programs in preparing students for pre-professional pursuits (i.e., field experience and internships) and an expansion of research in this area has been encouraged (e.g., Eagleman & McNary, 2010). Yoh and Choi (2011) offer a notable exception, finding that students appear to be prepared in the career fields that most sport management programs tend to cover through their curriculum, and specifically, “that there was a significant gap between classroom instruction and the real-world experiences” (p. 10). While internships, as an academic component, have been discussed in regards to their importance within their initial inception into the sport management curriculum (e.g., Chouinard, 1993; Jowdy, McDonald, & Spence, 2004; Sutton, 1989), the discussion of their evolution—as a result of significant industry changes—has only been touched on (Surujlal & Singh, 2010; Yoh & Choi, 2011).

Research in the area of sport management field experience has generally focused on program characteristics and best practices related to facilitating quality internships for students (e.g., Case, 2003, 2007; Chouinard, 1993; Cuneen, 2004; Jowdy et al., 2004; Kelley, 2004; Verner, 2004; Young & Baker, 2004); students perceptions of their internship experiences (e.g., Ross & Beggs, 2007; Stratta, 2004); internship preparedness (e.g., Williams, 2004); and ultimate career choices (e.g., Case, 2007). In addition, work has been done regarding the role of internships in linking theory to practice (Young & Baker, 2004), using the internship experience as a mechanism for professional preparation (Surujlal & Singh, 2010),

and examining both the students’ (Ross & Beggs, 2007; Stratta, 2004; Yoh & Choi, 2011) and employers’ (Ross & Beggs, 2007; Williams, 2004) perspectives of the sport management internship. Specifically, it has been noted that these opportunities provide experiences and guidance that assist in the bridge between theory and practice, laying a foundation for the development of one’s “professional self” (Todd, 2006; Surujlal & Singh, 2010). Surujlal and Singh (2010) recently assessed students’ perceptions of the value in the internship experience itself. While this did not provide evidence of their level of preparedness for these opportunities, findings did indicate that sport management internships provided various levels of preparation for postcollegiate activities, including the student’s professional/personal development, marketability, and adaptability.

Given the fiscally restricted economic climate in the U.S., combined with the highly competitive nature of the sport industry and the increased number of students in sport management-related majors (Schwab et al., 2013), it is crucially important that universities, degree programs, and faculty continue to adapt to the demands of the sport industry and meet the needs of sport management students. Analyzing and reevaluating sport management programs and curricula are imperative in both a practical sense, for student matriculation and success, as well as to gain a more nuanced understanding of sport management as an academic discipline (Jones et al., 2008; Stier & Schneider, 2000). Thus, continued focus needs to attend to the important issue of students’ professional preparation and the way in which programs employ the experiential learning component of their curricula for maximum student benefit.

As such, the purpose of this study is both theoretical and practical, seeking to (a) examine the preparedness of sport management students for both their collegiate (i.e., field experience, internship) and postcollegiate (i.e., graduate school, entry into the labor force) practical experiences; and (b) provide insight for academicians structuring sport management programs and curricula. The following research questions (RQs) guided this investigation:

RQ1: How well did the sport management curriculum prepare students for internships/pre-professional experience?

RQ2: How can the sport management curriculum be improved in relation to student preparation for endeavors in the sport industry?

RQ3: How does internship performance correlate with and reflect academic coursework?

RQ4: How prepared are students for their postcollegiate endeavors in the sport industry, based on their internship and academic coursework?

Accordingly, this research seeks to answer a variety of questions that may assist in the development of sport management curricula to ensure student preparedness for field experiences and subsequent postcollegiate endeavors.

Methods

This research explored the subject of student preparedness through a mixed method study centering on data collected over four consecutive semesters (fall 2012, winter 2013, spring 2013, and summer 2013) from sport management undergraduate students at one U.S. university located in the mid-Atlantic region and their internship site supervisors. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and several themes emerged.

Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data collection included a web-based survey and an intern performance analysis. The adoption/adaptation of these instruments was the result of a review of relevant literature, an assessment of current industry and student needs, and recommendations by the university's Career Center professional staff. At the end of each applicable semester, surveys were distributed to all students enrolled in the required internship course and performance analyses were conducted by all site supervisors over the same span of time. This study used preexisting instruments for both the student survey and the site supervisor evaluation. These instruments were developed and distributed by the university's Career Center and are mandated for all campus internship programs. Both instruments assessed five dimensions related to career preparation, specifically, general preparation, communication skills, critical thinking, technology, and leadership development & ethics. Each dimension included multiple items that were measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*exceptional*) (see Table 3 for student results and Table 4 for site supervisor results).

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data were collected in the following ways, each assessing the dimensions of general preparation, communication, critical thinking, technology, and leadership & ethics.

Web-Based Survey. The same web-based survey referenced above was also used to collect qualitative information from student participants via input boxes requesting written feedback. Questions included in the qualitative portion of the survey inquired about (a) how classroom work impacted preparedness at internship sites; (b) which courses, in particular, augmented preparation; (c) what specific subject areas did students wish they would have had an opportunity to take courses in; (d) how their internship impacted their level of preparedness for a sport management career (i.e., the

factors of general preparation, communication, critical thinking, technology, and leadership & ethics); and (e) suggestions for programmatic changes to improve the student experience.

Focus Groups. A total of six focus groups were conducted at the end of the internship experiences. Five to 12 student interns comprised each focus group. Participation in sessions was voluntary and conducted by trained staff from the university's Career Center to minimize bias and avoid issues of power relations between the researchers (professors) and student participants. All meetings were recorded by the facilitator and transcribed by the researchers. The focus groups served a dual purpose—not only were they an important data collection method in this research, but they also allowed the Career Center staff an opportunity to seek valuable information about the sport management internship process so they could better assist students in the future. Questions asked during the sessions were designed by researchers who met with and instructed facilitators on the goals of the research project and the focus groups. Facilitators were given a protocol of semistructured questions with prompts to seek follow-up information where appropriate. Specifically, questions focused on assessing student perceptions of (a) the sport management program generally, including perceptions of the curriculum, faculty, staff, university resources, and recommendations for change; (b) their preparation for their internship experiences (i.e., general preparation, communication, critical thinking, technology, and/or leadership & ethics); and (c) how they perceived their internship experience to influence their future career plans.

Site Supervisor Feedback. Student intern site supervisors/industry professionals offered feedback regarding interns via phone calls and emails. Supervisors offered feedback related to how the sport management program could better prepare interns and what specific skill-areas students were lacking. Site supervisors were posed with a number of questions, including: (a) recommended skills that they would like to see for current/future interns, (b) recommended courses that they thought would benefit the curriculum (additional, removal, and alteration), and (c) how prepared they believe their intern(s) was for work in this industry segment, specifically addressing the areas of general preparation, communication, critical thinking, technology, and/or leadership & ethics.

All aforementioned qualitative data collected from students and site supervisors were uploaded into the qualitative data management program, Atlas.ti. This program was used to organize and categorize data through the practice of open, axial, and selective coding (cf. Creswell, 2003; Daly, 2007). Coding through computer software can assist researchers in breaking their data down into “manageable chunks” which can be sorted and categorized to assist in the interpretation and analysis of data (Stroh, 2000, p. 210). Specifically, key themes and common perceptions regarding our sport management

curriculum and student preparedness for internship/pre-professional experiences were identified through this process. To ensure trustworthiness and credibility in relation to the qualitative data analysis, several measures were taken to achieve validity during the research process (Creswell, 2003). First, this research used multiple methods to tackle the research questions, including quantitative and qualitative surveys, interviews, and focus groups, all of which engaged a variety of constituent groups. Second, saturation was achieved through prolonged contact and the maintenance of ongoing relationships with the participants. Lastly, peer debriefing was used as the authors discussed preliminary findings with a variety of sport industry professionals, faculty members both within and outside the program, career center staff, alumni and students.

Results

The overall student sample in this study ($n = 136$) comprised 75% male and 25% female participants, all with senior or second-semester junior standing. Data were collected over four different semesters within a 1-year period. Student participants were asked to complete a voluntary web-based survey ($n = 100$; 74% response rate) as well as participate in voluntary focus groups ($n = 59$; 43% response rate) at the end of the semester in which they completed their for-credit internship. The students were primarily unpaid interns within the following types of organizations: collegiate athletics (24%), youth sport/sport development (14%), major/minor league sport

(12%), sport journalism/communications (12%), event management (12%), community/private/campus recreation (9%), health and fitness (6%), facility/club management (5%), sports apparel (2%), sport agency/marketing (2%), and national governing bodies (2%). The site supervisors ($n = 82$) participating in this research were predominantly male (78%). They completed a university-developed/mandated performance analysis of their interns (100% response rate) and provided feedback via personal communications ($n = 49$; 60% response rate). The qualitative and quantitative data collected from both the student participants and site supervisors centered on various dimensions of student preparedness for their internship positions to answer the four overarching research questions driving the study. A comprehensive analysis of the various data sources led to the development and identification of three major themes: (1) academic development, focusing on what components of the curriculum best prepared students' for their internships and future careers; (2) experiential development, demonstrating the importance of practical experience and the internship process for students' future careers and general industry preparedness; and (3) professional development, recognizing the need for students to be presented with opportunities to improve their personal and industry-related skills and competencies.

Academic Development

Overall, students were satisfied with the curriculum they were presented within their sport management major and its role in preparing them for their future careers. Yet of all course offerings (see Table 1), results from the

Table 1 Sport Management Course Requirements

Major Requirements (3 credit hours each)	Business Minor Requirements (3 credit hours each)
Introduction to the Sport Industry	Accounting I
Sport: A Cross-Cultural Perspective	Accounting II
Sport Management	Microeconomics
Sport & Society	Macroeconomics
Internship	Finance
Sport Marketing	Marketing
Sport Governance, Policies & Legal Issues	Management
Cultural Economy of Sport	Statistics
Regularly Offered Electives (15 credit hours required)	
History of Sport in America	Leadership for Sport Professionals
Introduction to Recreation & Leisure	Sport Sales & Sponsorship
Principles of Coaching	Special Topics Courses, TBA by semester
Modern Olympic Games	Sociology of Sport
Psychology of Sport	Sport Facilities Management
Sport in Film	Sport & the Media
Second Internship	Intramurals Management

web-based survey indicated a majority of students found only three of their required seven classroom-based sport management courses to be valuable: Sport Management (77%), Introduction to the Sport Industry (64%), and Sport Marketing (63%)¹ (see Table 2).

Students specifically mentioned Sport Management and Introduction to the Sport Industry as “the meat of the major” (Student Participant 1, focus group) and really found value in the resume and career preparation activities that are part of the curriculum in the Industry course. Further, while not required core classes, the electives Sport Sales and Sponsorship and Facilities Management were highly lauded within the focus groups (despite their low rating within the web-based survey, see Table 2) due to their applied, business-focused content:

Sport Sales and Sponsorship is one of the few classes that it’s pretty much all based on real-life experiences and things you’ll actually be doing rather than [what] you [learn] in a classroom that you’re not really going to use again (Student Participant 2, focus group).

Student participant 3 (focus group) offered, “I took Facility Management . . . and [to] actually be able to apply it, I think helped a lot, versus going in there [internship] kind of blind and not realizing what’s going on.” Students generally praised the more applied courses and wished there were more opportunities for them to take classes

Table 2 Sport Management Courses Perceived as Valuable by Students in Web-Based Survey

Course Offering	Students Rating the Course Valuable ^a
Sport Management	77%
Introduction to the Sport Industry	64%
Sport Marketing	63%
Sport Governance	29%
Cultural Economy of Sport	29%
Sport & Society	22%
Sport: A Cross-Cultural Perspective	14%
Sport & the Media ^b	16%
Leadership for Sport Professionals ^b	2%
Sport Sales & Sponsorship ^b	9%
Modern Olympic Games ^b	1%
Principles of Coaching ^b	2%
Psychology of Sport ^b	1%
Sport Facilities Management ^b	1%
History of Sport in America ^b	1%

^aRating was derived from a question on the web survey asking students “which course(s) helped you feel prepared (for internship).” Students were asked to check all that apply from a listing of the seven required classroom courses and had the option of writing in up to five electives.

^bDenotes elective offering.

with clear practical application, specifically mentioning computer skills, social media and professional communication, and experience with sales and marketing (an area covered in both required and elective course offerings). As stated by participant 4 (focus group), “I think more on-site work . . . actually going somewhere and doing . . . the classroom stuff we do doesn’t actually prepare you like being somewhere and doing it would.” Further, student participant 5 (focus group) explained:

I would say, going off of Sport Marketing, more emphasis on new media, and social media, just because a lot of entry-level positions now are asking you to have sales and marketing skills. It’s just important to be on top of the latest trends, whether it’s Twitter or Instagram, so if you can learn how to utilize those as a business tool rather than just a personal tool that can put you ahead of the same in terms of the hiring process.

In addition, this university requires a business minor as part of the Sport Management degree requirements and students found great value in this component of their preparedness as expressed via the web-based survey and within focus groups. Conversely, within the focus group setting, students offered criticism on the inclusion of the sport sociology focused components of the curriculum. Specifically, they expressed hesitation about the benefits gained through credit hours in their two required sociocultural courses: Sport and Society and Sport: Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Other sociology-based elective courses in the curriculum, of which there are six regularly offered, were not referenced.

According to site supervisor comments via personal communications, there was a general acknowledgment that their intern’s general level of preparation was strong; however, many advocated students’ skills be improved in various academic areas. Specifically, they mentioned that communication skills were essential and could be augmented, offering suggestions of both speaking and writing-based communication courses so as to eliminate the “deer in headlights” look that many interns possessed (Site Supervisor 1, personal communication).

In this line of work, a successful golf professional needs to be able to communicate . . . I believe that a communication class should be mandatory for any sport management major. Sport is all about knowing people and communication is the first step. (Site Supervisor 2, personal communication)

Further, site supervisors believed that more, experiential, hands-on learning opportunities were important to incorporate into the curriculum, with specific attention devoted to applied learning in the skill areas of computer applications, graphic design, and media communications (e.g., press releases, social media, etc.). This was echoed in the sentiment of one supervisor who mentioned, “I’d love to see students come to the table with more social media marketing ideas.” (Site Supervisor 3, personal communication)

In addition, while students noted their abilities in the areas of Preparation and Communication Skills as the highest among the five categories within the web survey results (see Table 3), these two dimensions received among the lowest mean scores in four of the five semesters by their site supervisors (see Table 4). Another noteworthy finding is the site supervisor's high mean scores for Leadership Development & Ethics, given the focus group findings regarding the sociocultural (often ethically based) curriculum.

Experiential Development

Focus group findings demonstrate that students found great value in the mandate to have an internship to matriculate through the Sport Management program. They indicated the need for and value in completing multiple internships and/or having a longer, more substantial experience, regardless of academic credit or requirements.² Specifically, when asked what other courses they would have liked the opportunity to take during their time in the Sport Management program, many responded with some variation of one student's sentiment: "fewer classroom courses and more internship opportunities" (Student Participant 6, focus group). Focus group discussions revealed that students felt the internships were important for their general knowledge and understanding of the industry. Further, through these experiences they felt as though they gained crucial practical experience helping them gain insight into what they might want to do (or what they do not want to do) within the industry; however, when directly asked by focus group facilitators,

many students were unable to articulate a focused career goal following their internship. Students indicated that they felt more prepared following their internship because they had legitimate experience to add to their resume, not necessarily because they felt prepared to decide upon a future career. Within both focus groups and the web-based survey, multiple students directly referred to the internship experience strictly as "a resume builder," used primarily for "more experience" and to "look better when actually applying for a job," rather than an opportunity to cultivate relationships or focus on building experiential competencies. Students also felt as though the internship helped them see more of the industry and facilitate network connections, which were valuable to their future. However, much of the information they offered during the focus group sessions indicated they do not actively network or work to use the contacts they have made, representing a contradiction in their professional preparation and their ability to draw on their experience to benefit themselves in the future.

Data from site supervisors also substantiated the need for practical experience. Via personal communications, many specifically mentioned that they would have liked and/or would encourage students to have completed a practical, applied project as part of their experiential development, the result of which would be a formal, tangible business document (e.g., a marketing plan). Further, in personal communications with site supervisors, it was generally noted that skills and qualities in the areas of adaptability/coachability, communication (written, verbal, interpersonal), organization, and accountability are often lacking among interns and are important for

Table 3 Student Preparation Analysis (by Semester)

	Preparation	Communication Skills	Critical Thinking	Technology	Leadership Development & Ethics
Fall 2012 (<i>n</i> = 9)	4.44	4.11	4.00	4.56	4.00
Winter 2013 (<i>n</i> = 12)	4.58	4.58	4.75	4.67	4.75
Spring 2013 (<i>n</i> = 32)	4.53	4.28	4.44	4.22	4.50
Summer 3 2013 (<i>n</i> = 34)	4.56	4.62	4.41	4.38	4.50
Summer 6 2013 (<i>n</i> = 10)	4.40	4.90	4.20	4.30	4.50
Mean score (<i>SD</i>)	4.50 (0.06)	4.50 (0.08)	4.36 (0.07)	4.43 (0.08)	4.45 (0.07)

Table 4 Site Supervisor Internship Performance Analysis (by Semester)

	Preparation	Communication Skills	Critical Thinking	Technology	Leadership Development & Ethics
Fall 2012 (<i>n</i> = 22)	4.42	4.53	4.62	4.67	4.73
Winter 2013 (<i>n</i> = 13)	4.74	4.56	4.6	4.58	4.78
Spring 2013 (<i>n</i> = 49)	4.47	4.49	4.52	4.63	4.65
Summer 3 2013 (<i>n</i> = 26)	4.51	4.54	4.48	4.69	4.63
Summer 6 2013 (<i>n</i> = 10)	4.81	4.46	4.49	4.61	4.71
Mean score (<i>SD</i>)	4.59 (0.17)	4.52 (0.04)	4.54 (0.06)	4.64 (0.04)	4.7 (0.06)

future industry workers. There were multiple, specific references to leadership qualities offered by the site supervisors:

I would say a lack in leadership skills. Many interns like to take the “backseat” on projects until they are told to take the lead. We like when our interns and staff take charge and make things happen on their own. We are always there for helping and answering any questions; however, we see a lot of people “give up” too soon because they were not confident in their work or decisions. (Site Supervisor 4, personal communication)

The lack of leadership qualities among interns was commonly cited, though like the others mentioned, is certainly, in part, an experiential competency developed through practical, applied learning situations. This finding represents an interesting contradiction given that the quantitative site supervisor feedback offered within the internship performance analysis survey indicates leadership skills are stronger than the four other areas measured (see Table 4). This may be due to the fact that the quantitative category measured “Leadership Development & Ethics,” thus technically assessing two skills—whether a student increased their leadership skill development and engaged in ethical behavior over the course of the internship. It might be feasible that the ethical component was more highly rated. Numerous site supervisors’ discussions of leadership skills within personal communications referred more to students lacking initiative, and they were adamant about this deficiency.

Professional Development

Without directly referencing the term *professional development*, focus group findings point to students garnering skills and competencies in this area as a crucial component of being successful. Students indicated a particular need for increased help and guidance in finding their internship site placements.³ Further, students felt resources to improve resumes, job searching skills, and general professionalism were important.⁴ Lastly, as mentioned above, many students who had already completed internships or were almost finished with the process were unable to communicate a focused career goal. However, many did articulate that they did not want to work in the subsegment of the industry in which they interned. Many students simply indicated they had a desire to work in sport management in some capacity, findings that are problematic for students on the cusp of graduation as well as desiring to enter a highly competitive industry.

Site supervisors pointed to other areas of professional development as crucially important but definitely lacking in recent interns. Specifically, they explained industry- and company-based research and general knowledge to be lacking, echoing one supervisor’s sentiment “that before their internship they [should] conduct some research so that they are knowledgeable about the department and programs offered” (Site Supervisor 5,

personal communication). In focus groups, numerous students agreed with this observation, admitting as one student did, for example, “I didn’t really do anything extra [to prepare], to be honest” (Student Participant 7, focus group). In personal communications site supervisors also indicated a need for students to be more innovative, self-starters who paid more attention to detail, engaged in better and/or more effective communications with various stakeholders, including reaching out, networking, and following up. These remarks from industry professionals were evident by discussions in focus group sessions. For example, student participant 8 (focus group) confessed, “There should be like . . . a Common Sense 101 class. All the [things] that your site supervisor expects you to have as common sense, but unless you’ve had a job before you wouldn’t really know exactly how to do.” Another explained:

I think that you should be required to do two internships before you’re done [at the university]. Because I had two. I took one as an elective and I had two completely different experiences. And I also think that helps with . . . learning a job. The more things you’re exposed to, the more likely you are to have a job. (Student Participant 9, focus group)

Collectively, site supervisors’ observations about student interns were backed up through data gathered during the focus groups as students discussed the fact that they did not contact previous interns at their future internship site or other sites where they may have been interested in working. They were unconcerned about this lack of contact, viewing the internship as an independent experience.

Discussion and Implications

While various researchers have noted the importance of experiential learning for professional development (e.g., Petersen & Pierce, 2009; Surujlal & Singh, 2010; Yoh & Choi, 2011), minimal work has been done to examine what “preparedness” actually looks like in the field of sport management. As such, this work provides a foundation from which both academicians and practitioners can benefit by further examining the importance of this particular piece of the sport management curriculum. This research allows us to critically consider the role of experiential learning in sport management. In particular, it offers an extension of early work, which noted the importance of the sport management internship (e.g., Cuneen, 2004; Moorman, 2004; Stier, 2002), and shifts forward to investigate the importance of internship preparedness. Furthermore, it provides us with concrete information regarding potential practical actions for the future (i.e., adaptations in curriculum, etc.), benefitting students, faculty, site supervisors, and future employers.

Overall, our findings yielded three major themes: academic development, experiential development, and professional development, substantiating the need for

curriculum changes and the ability to harness campus and industry resources to improve student preparedness (summarized in Table 5). While these themes are vital in moving forward, of particular note is the role that communication skills, broadly defined, played in spanning all three themes. As communication (both formal and informal) evolves in our society, it will play a major role in the academy moving forward, a finding echoed by Petersen and Pierce's (2009) study of professional sport human resource professionals.

Academic Development

To address the theme of Academic Development, it is necessary to understand the purpose of higher education. While it is pivotal to ensure that students obtain a well-rounded academic experience, colleges and universities are foremost institutes of higher learning. As such, it is important to determine our role as educators in the current era of higher education defined by following a university's vision/mission and its goals to serve students with academic versus technical programs. Many of our findings, from both the student and site-supervisor perspective, are driven by the "practical" preparation/skill

development of our students. While the results were not always consistent across samples of students and site supervisors, the implications were related in nature. Similar to Sotiriadou (2011), we found that students felt Communication Skills were their strongest attributes during their on-site experience; however, site supervisors felt the opposite, noting Communication Skills as a major competency that students were lacking/needed improvement. This is problematic and likely needs to be addressed via curriculum (e.g., Petersen & Pierce, 2009) as well as through interview screening processes and on-site training at internship/job sites. Student comments regarding networking are disturbing, and coupled with the discrepancy in perceptions regarding their communication skills, this topic is of extreme importance.

In a recent reexamination of sport management internships, Yoh and Choi (2011) found that among the five major factors, "academic preparedness" received the lowest satisfaction rating. This finding clearly indicated that there was a significant gap between classroom instruction and the real-world experiences. Therefore, we suggest that sport management programs should consistently review their curriculum to provide better practice applications (e.g., Stier & Schneider, 2000). One

Table 5 Summary of Recommendations for Curriculum Change and Improved Student Preparedness

Theme	Recommendations
Academic Development	• Programs need to address students' communication skills via curriculum as well as within interview screening processes and on-site training at internship/job sites. • Students need more networking opportunities, which will also be helpful in addressing their communication skills. • Programs should consistently review their curriculum to provide better practice applications. • Use practitioners, as guest speakers and adjunct lecturers, from various segments in the sport industry into classrooms to give better insight into the "real-world" to students. • Explore cross-campus collaborations, faculty networks, industry-driven electives and new technology to enhance academic programs. • Encourage "applied" opportunities—"from hands on" assignments to more clearly articulating sociocultural course content to the "real world." • Tailor curriculum to be more rigorous and sequential so students recognize the major is about more than having an interest in sports.
Experiential Development	• Imbed more practical experience into curriculum providing a platform to integrate the theoretical with the practical. • Incorporate mandatory preinternship experience coursework (e.g., formal contact hours through on-campus groups such as athletics and campus recreation, volunteer hours with local organizations, etc.). • Develop more practical, hands-on upper-level required and elective courses in which students work collaboratively, under the guidance of a professor, to complete a tangible, semester-long task.
Professional Development	• Students need more confidence, professional preparation, networking opportunities, and better utilization of the career center on campus, all of which go hand-in-hand and can be incorporated into professional preparation coursework activities. • Addressing this in a multifaceted manner is important and should involve combining the resources in the program, on campus, and via relationships with external constituents.

possible solution is to hire or invite practitioners from various fields in the sport industry into sport management programs to give students better insight into the “real world” (Yoh & Choi, 2011, p. 10). While these findings corroborate with our site supervisors’ reflections, they also confirm the importance of the faculty member’s role in ensuring that programs evolve to meet the needs of the current crop of students as well as the changing face of the industry.

While many programs lay their foundation in the principles of management, leadership, marketing, and sociocultural aspects of sports (Schneider & Stier, 2005), there has been an evolution to curriculums that include an applied perspective. As widespread curriculum changes occur within many sport management programs, there are a number of questions to ask regarding the “best” direction to ensure student preparedness. First, our findings, contributing to a long-standing debate about the inclusion of sociocultural courses within sport management curriculum (e.g., Cuneen & Parks, 2001; Stier & Schneider, 2000; Petersen & Pierce, 2009), indicated the dislike and perceived unrelated nature of the sociocultural courses to the discipline of sport management. However, as faculty offering students a well-rounded, liberal arts education, we are aware of the benefits of these courses in developing students as citizens, community members, and, ultimately, thoughtful sport managers. Echoing Schwab et al. (2013), understanding the role of sport within our culture is important for students’ general understanding of society. In addition, sociocultural courses can be a wonderful complement to a sport management degree if the content within the course is articulated to students in a way that they can understand its relation to their education.

However, are these sociocultural courses the *best* way to prepare our students for the rigors of the highly competitive, business-oriented industry they are seeking to enter? How do faculty measure, evaluate, and decide the answer to this question within the context of a well-rounded education at an institute of higher learning? The make-up of the faculty where this study took place boasts equal numbers of sociocultural and sport management faculty, and the curriculum includes several sociocultural electives offered each semester. There can be great value in the variety of topics, perspectives, and competencies gained within various sociocultural courses, particularly as a result of new industry initiatives (e.g., sport for development), yet findings from this study indicate that students do not appreciate how cultural concepts and critical insights could be useful or valuable in their future occupation. We believe in teaching these courses, continuing to add an emphasis on encouraging students to think about how they might be able to *apply* this knowledge beyond the classroom—a push that we advocate within all courses taught in the sport management curriculum.

Experiential Development

Our findings reflect both our students’ and site supervisors’ interest in creating additional opportunities for

practical experience to be imbedded into the curriculum. However, questions remain about how to successfully incorporate these experiences so that they are both reasonable for the faculty member/program and have a positive impact on the student and his/her development. This has both theoretical and practical implications, as the ethical role of applied work at the undergraduate level is still being addressed. Specifically, the evolving role of higher education is called into question as the belief that this progression must reflect the fine line between the general academic foundation provided at the undergraduate level and one that verges on technical training. However, as workforce needs evolve and employer expectations shift, increased levels of experiential learning will allow students to address their “assumptions” of the work environment in relation to the realities of the workplace (“Bridge that gap,” 2013). In addition, this will continue to provide a platform with which academic and practical competencies can be integrated (“Bridge that gap,” 2013).

The fact that many of our students could not articulate a focused career goal following their internship is quite disturbing; however, we hope to eliminate some of these concerns through increased exposure to industry professionals along with the implementation of various field experiences earlier in their academic career. In addition to the role that academic development, in the form of course sequencing and curriculum adaptation, can play in creating a solid platform for the growth of our students, the incorporation of mandatory preinternship experiences can also help bridge the gap from academic to industry. These experiences could include formal contact hours through on-campus groups such as athletics and campus recreation, volunteer hours with local organizations, and/or an experiential/applied component to relevant upper-level coursework. Moreover, this study has demonstrated the importance of offering more internship opportunities to students. These opportunities could come through longer internship experiences with additional credit hours as well as by students seeking multiple and varied internships. Further, we see the need for more applied learning to be present within core courses and more practical, hands-on electives to be offered within the curriculum. For example, electives we have included in our course offerings since this research concluded revolve around students working collaboratively, under the guidance of a professor, to complete a tangible, semester-long task. Specifically we have had students responsible for the marketing efforts of nonrevenue sports teams as well as the organization of a major fund raising event. In addition, we foresee events such as “pack the arena/stadium” for home opener games and sports communication/broadcasting roles for students as future ideas to work into applied course offerings.

Professional Development

As noted, our findings reflect previous work by Chegg Inc., which found a “gap between the skills hiring managers reported seeing in recent graduates and the skills

the students perceive themselves as having mastered” (“Bridge that gap,” 2013, p. 2). Even more telling is the full representation of their work, reporting that fewer than two in five hiring managers (39%) believed that the recent college graduates they interviewed in the past two years were completely or very prepared for a job in their field of study, whereas 50% of college students rated themselves as prepared in the same terms (“Bridge that gap,” 2013). This disconnect is similar to what was observed through the findings in this study. As such, it is crucial that sport management students understand the unique nature of the sport industry, including the “tight job market, the significance of internships, personal contacts, professional networking, and the possible need for graduate education” to be best prepared to facilitate their own future success (Schwab et al., 2013, p. 25).

In this study, many students simply indicated they had a desire to work in sport management in some capacity, findings that are problematic for students on the cusp of graduation as well as desiring to enter a highly competitive industry. In addition, our findings are indicative of students’ lack of motivation, confidence, ability to network, and their general desire to go above and beyond expectations. While this might be true, and reflected in some capacity through site supervisors, there was an overwhelmingly positive response to the student’s on-site performance. Therefore, this begs the question as to what the disconnect might be.

Our results indicate that this could be due to student confidence (or lack thereof). As such, we argue that a greater push toward professional preparedness could instill a level of confidence that is “earned” through action. While the use of internal resources might be vital in alleviating this challenge, it is important to mention the university included in this study does have a sophisticated Career Center, yet many students do not take advantage of these services and cite the need for skill development despite its existence and valiant attempts to work with students. In addition, it is important to note that the faculty who teach in classes with a professional preparedness component stress networking and connections (as do guest speakers) within their courses. However, there still seems to be a disconnect, as many students do not recognize that networking is about building and maintaining relationships rather than simply shaking hands and introducing themselves. Therefore, this supports Grasgreen’s (2013) claims, noting that career development should be embedded into the undergraduate curriculum, both preparing students for postcollegiate pursuits and justifying the value of the degree. Perhaps the best approach is to address this in a multifaceted manner, combining the resources in one’s program (e.g., pre-professional coursework), with on campus (e.g., Career Center) and external constituents (e.g., local sport entities).

Limitations and Future Directions

This research, while contributing to the important topic of student preparedness, is limited by the fact that it is an assessment of only one university’s students and,

subsequently, their site supervisors, and it thus provides a limited sample. A more robust analysis should be conducted taking into consideration interns at a variety of the 380 U.S. sport management degree-granting institutions as well as a study investigating the role of student preparedness within international programs. Further, only one full year of interns were studied. It is possible that a larger sample and/or additional classes of students might provide different and important data. In addition, participating site supervisors operated in a variety of sub-segments of the sport industry, likely had varying levels of contact with student interns, and had different student(s) working within their organizations. So while their comments are important, valid, and represent the opinion of a current sport industry professional hiring and managing interns/new graduates, each of their individual samples from which to infer behavior is small. Further, while this research had IRB approval, and student grades in their sport management courses were not impacted by their participation, it is possible students withheld or misrepresented their true feelings about the program, worried that their sentiments would impact their future in some way.

While a renewal of this particular line of research does begin to reexamine this topic and launch it in a new direction, there will be a need for continued examination of both interns and site supervisors in a longitudinal manner. Of particular significance is (a) an assessment of the way that resources (both campus and industry) are harnessed to better prepare students’ for future career-related opportunities; (b) an examination of how, and in what ways, do internship experiences increase job opportunities; (c) a thorough exploration of how curricula can be improved, redesigned, and redeveloped with new, innovative course offerings that correspond to needs of students as well as the sport industry; and (d) an analysis and critical investigation of the way in which characteristics of the millennial generation of students impact sport management degree programs, and more broadly, institutions of higher learning. In addition, while we realize that this evolution does need to be taken into consideration, many university/program budgets do not have the resources for increased initiatives. With a decrease in support for new hiring, programs are forced to stretch their resources even thinner to meet these needs. Furthermore, given the current legal climate for internships (e.g., Greenhouse, 2013), industry support (both general and financial) has changed or been scaled back. Due to this new level of scrutiny, there has been renewed attention paid to the evolution of the role of the intern, which will be fundamental in the redevelopment of the internship component in academic development. While vital to digging deeper into the progression of this particular phenomenon, these topics were not addressed here and we do suggest their further investigation with future work.

Conclusion

In general, the purpose of this work was to assess sport management student preparedness before their first “official” role in the industry (i.e., the for-credit internship). It

serves as an important theoretical contribution to research in the area of sport management education as it begins to fill a gap in the literature regarding student preparedness for pre-professional experiences. Further, this research also has significant practical, pedagogical implications for faculty in sport management and related programs. While our findings do support the work that is currently being done in the classroom, they also indicate the need for continued evolution and adaptation of programs and curricula to respond to the dynamic nature of the industry and academia (e.g., sport for development, analytics). Specifically, sport industry professionals are seeking students with skill competencies that may be lacking, particularly in the areas of technology and communication. However, academia is changing as well and is currently facing many difficult issues impacting teaching and learning. For instance, the current fiscal climate (Rossi, 2014; “The future of universities,” 2014), the push for all students to seek higher education (in the U.S.) (Wood, 2012), the diverse characteristics of the “millennial” (Bart, 2011) and “non-traditional” student (Staley & Trinkle, 2011), traditional versus online programs (“The future of universities,” 2014), a universal push toward experiential education (Braid, 2008; Hering, 2010)—all of which contribute to the important job of preparing students for success beyond the classroom.

Overall, we believe that this work has the potential to shift the focus of this line of research from post- to preinternship. While it is vital to understand where our graduates expect to find themselves after they leave our hallowed halls, their level of preparedness before the internship process must be addressed further. As such, this begins the journey to assess and adapt curricula to ensure that changes are made to meet both industry and student needs.

Notes

1. While the internship is a 3-credit-hour course on the list of offerings, students did not view this as a course in the traditional sense and treated their internship as a separate entity. The majority of students found the internship course valuable, but it was often excluded from their discussions of courses and treated as a separate component in the web-based survey and focus group discussions.
2. Internship at the time of this study was worth 3 credit hours and required 120 hr of work, regardless of site; however, some students engaged with sites where they put in far more than 120 hr.
3. The internship coordinator does not place students according to the volume of students and the need to be self-motivated in this industry, though this role works to facilitate opportunities by way of circulating postings and developing relationships with local and national organizations.
4. It is important to note this university has a sophisticated career center, yet many students do not take advantage of these services and indicate the need for skill development despite its existence and the many ways they attempt to work with students.

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