

Adding Rigor



to the Sport Management Internship—Part 2

The Needs and Concerns of Students During the Sport Management Internship Experience

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Analysis of students' experiences in a sport management internship reveals a typology of their concerns.

The internship experience is one of the most critical components of professional preparation that leads to employment in the sport industry (Hager, 1984; Parkhouse, 1978, 1984, 1987; Parks, 1991; VanderZwaag, 1980). However, very little research reflects the perspectives of student interns. The majority of the literature on sport management internships provides recommendations from practitioners (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1993; Parks & Quain, 1986) or contains information based on the curricular concerns of educators (Chouinard, 1993; DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990). Only two studies have focused exclusively on the concerns of sport management students. Bell and Countiss (1993) evaluated the value of internships by highlighting the personal perspectives of sport management alumni. In addition, Sutton (1989) outlined components of a successful sport management internship for students. Although both of these articles are highly educational, the information provided in the first article was based on the experiences of only five students from the same sport management program. In the second article, the author's own experiences and perceptions formed the basis for the recommendations. To date, no empirical studies have examined the sport management internship from students' perspectives.

Due to this void in the literature, the purpose of this study was to examine the needs and concerns of students when accessing and completing internships. Rather than relying solely on sport management professionals to determine the parameters of a rewarding internship, this study analyzed students' experiences in order to ascertain their perceptions of the sport management internship. Sport practitioners can use this information to provide students with a more satisfying and rewarding internship experience. In addition, students who are searching for an internship can use this information to make a more informed decision. Finally, this information can be used to assess the quality of internships.

Methodology

During a four-year period (1996–2000), researchers used qualitative methods to investigate the needs and concerns of students during their internship experience. This method gave the participants the freedom and flexibility to tell their own stories in their own words. Respondents included students who were currently looking for or participating in an internship and graduates of different sport management programs who had completed an internship. Although the respondents were both undergraduate and graduate students, the study focused on their experiences during the internship. Therefore, the classification of participants in the study was their relation to an internship, rather than their degree status. Twenty-six percent of the respondents had already completed an internship while the remaining 74 percent were either currently in or pursuing an internship. Although students were in different stages of professional development, participation in the study was contingent on their prior work experience (either part-time or full-time) in the sport industry. This experience not only provided students with feedback about their attributes and deficiencies from professionals in the industry, but it also exposed them to standards for evaluating their qualifications as aspiring professionals. Consequently, prior work experience allowed these students to discuss their needs and concerns in relation to their development as professionals. In order to ensure that the study's findings encompassed a broad range of perspectives and experiences, the investigator collected data from a demographically diverse group of 76 students: 46 percent ($n = 35$) females and 54 percent ($n = 41$) males, 42 percent ($n = 32$) African Americans and 58 percent ($n=44$) Caucasians, and ages between 20 and 25 years old. In addition, participants represented the philosophies of eight different undergraduate and graduate sport management programs located throughout the United States. This study was not intended to represent the entire population of sport management students; instead it was designed to explore the needs and concerns of students in regard to their internship experience and, subsequently, to examine the in-depth, qualitative meaning of their perceptions and experiences.

After receiving the subjects' approval, the study progressed in two stages, each of which included a different group of students. During the first stage, data were collected from 56 students who were pursuing or participating in a sport management internship. Students were asked to answer three open-ended questions:

1. What factors are or were important to you in selecting an internship?
2. What are or were your concerns upon beginning an internship?
3. What are your goals for participating in an internship?

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, students were asked to record only their sex, race, and age. They were repeatedly instructed to avoid writing their name or any other information that would reveal their identity.

During the coding of this information, emphasis was placed on identifying redundant responses, salient issues, and general themes. Although preliminary, these findings were both essential and critical to the success of data collection during the second stage. More specifically, information about the views and concerns of sport management students was unavailable in the literature, although it is necessary for the development of a relevant and meaningful qualitative research instrument. Findings from stage one were an important resource for identifying interview questions that would expand the scope of the initial findings and examine more thoroughly the significance of experiences throughout the sport management internship.

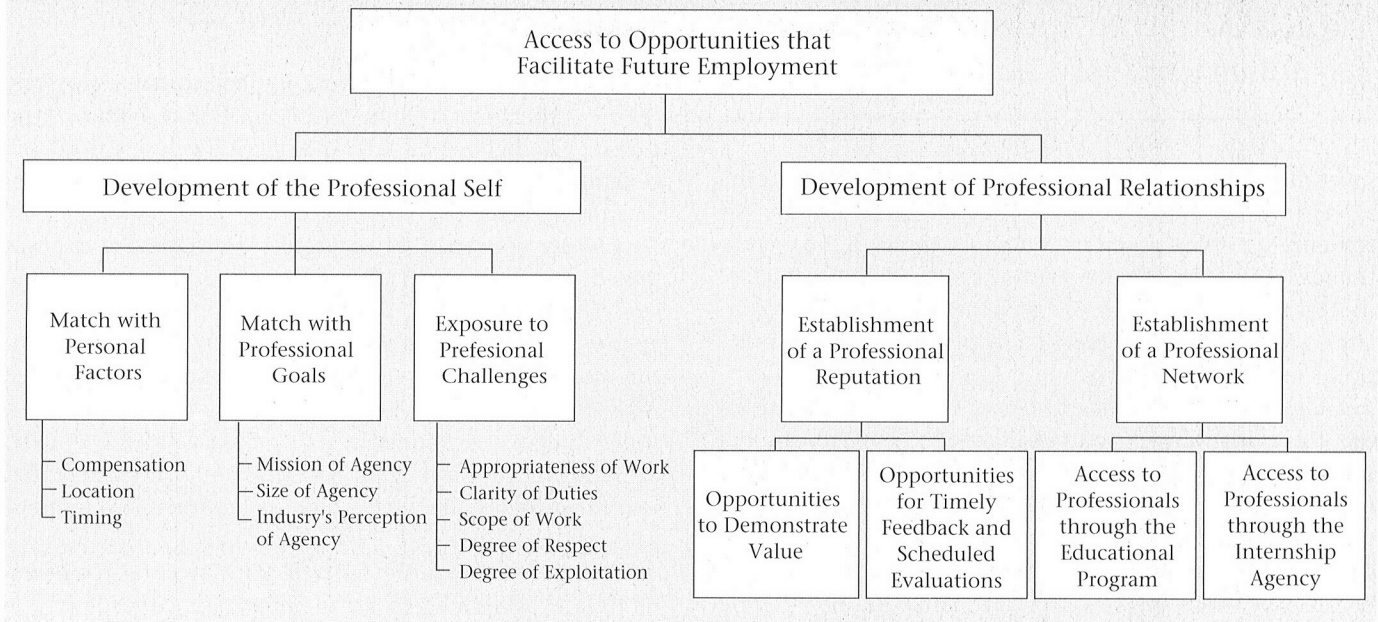
Data collection during stage two consisted of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 20 students who had already completed a sport management internship. Unlike the participants in stage one, these students were capable of reflecting on their needs and concerns during every phase of the internship: gaining access, completing the requirements, and transitioning to full-time employment. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, and they were audiotaped to improve the data's credibility, to facilitate the interviewer's note taking, and to increase the accuracy of data analysis. An open-ended format was used in order to allow participants to respond to every question freely and extensively. Tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. Responses to the questions during both stages of the study, in addition to the interviewer's notes, were entered into an electronic format. These files constituted the data for this study.

Inductive data analysis (Strauss, 1987) began early in the interview process. This analysis included coding data as concepts, grouping concepts into common categories, identifying contextual relationships that linked the categories, and ultimately, discovering a main theme that was central and relevant to students across internship contexts. A preliminary typology of students' responses emerged from this coding process. Data collection continued in order to ensure that these initial findings accurately explained the perceptions of students across contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Therefore, students who participated in subsequent interviews not only elaborated their needs and concerns as interns, but also verified or challenged the accuracy of the evolving typology. Consistent with the tenets of qualitative methodology, "You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine parts" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 7). Data collection ceased when the introduction of new information (i.e., data from interviews and feedback from students) did not challenge or change the proposed typology.

Findings

A typology of students' responses emerged from inductive data analysis (figure 1). This process resulted in the discovery of a dominant theme, ". . . for what appears to be the

Figure 1. Typology of Students' Responses Regarding the Internship Experience



main concern of or problem for the people in the setting, for what sums up in a pattern of behavior the substance of what is going on in the data, [and] for what is the essence of relevance reflected in the data" (Strauss, 1987, p. 35). The following main theme was both dominant and relevant to participants in this study: during the internship experience, students expect access to opportunities that facilitate future employment in the sport industry. Each of the categories of opportunities emerged from concepts that the students provided. While not all concepts within the typology pertained to every student, the final typology did capture the needs and concerns of each student.

The categorization of data led to the emergence of two major categories of opportunities that facilitate future employment: development of the professional self and development of professional relationships. The remainder of this article will discuss the concepts leading to the emergence of these categories.

Development of the Professional Self

Throughout data collection, students discussed the importance of factors that would enhance their professional development. These concerns were coded as concepts and grouped into three subcategories of opportunities: match with personal factors, match with professional goals, and exposure to professional challenges.

Match with Personal Factors. When asked about factors that were important in the selection of an internship, students initially mentioned personal factors that affected their opportunity for development. Nearly all students mentioned one or more of the following personal factors: compensation, location, and timing of the internship. Many students could not accept an internship without being compensated

either monetarily (e.g., salary, tuition waiver, stipend, books) or through in-kind sources (e.g., food, housing, travel expenses). Some students expressed concern about the location of the internship, especially if relocation resulted in extreme financial burdens or sacrifices in support systems (e.g., familial, emotional). Timing of the internship was also an important consideration of students. If the prospective internship did not occur at the culmination of their plan of study, then students chose to investigate other internship options. Another aspect of timing, the length of the internship, had to fit the students' life goals and educational plans. Some students did not accept an internship because it was too lengthy (e.g., a one-year commitment); others extended their academic schedule beyond the time when they should graduate in order to remain with the agency until their contract was complete.

Match with Professional Goals. Students frequently mentioned having access to internships that matched their professional goals. Factors that pertained to professional goals included the mission of the agency, the size of the agency, and the industry's perception of the agency. Students wanted to have access to internships that matched their area of concentration (e.g., marketing, management) and their desired segment of the sport industry (e.g., amateur, college, professional, corporate). The mission of the agency provided students with an overall picture of the agency and with the information necessary to ensure that the internship was consistent with their professional goals. Students also believed that the size of the agency—the number of employees and levels within an organization—needed to be consistent with their career goals. For example, working at a small sport-marketing agency appeared unattractive to those who aspired to work for an international

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sport-marketing firm. The sport industry's perception of the agency was also important to students. More specifically, students inquired about the economic stability of the agency, the visibility of the agency within the sport industry (e.g., the age of the company, the number and amount of contracts), and the business practices of the agency (e.g., reputation, credibility, integrity).

Exposure to Professional Challenges. Students identified the following factors that challenged their professional growth during an internship: appropriateness of work, clarity of duties, scope of work, degree of respect, and degree of exploitation. Having knowledge of these factors, before signing an internship agreement, was important to students because of their perceived significance in developing professional qualities that ultimately influenced employment opportunities.

One primary concern of students was that the work required of them would be appropriate for their level of education and previous work experience (appropriateness of work). Students wanted to know whether the required work responsibilities would challenge them to develop professionally. To a lesser extent, students wondered whether the expectations would demand too much for them to complete the internship requirements in a successful manner. Students also inquired about the opportunities for applying their academic knowledge during the internship experience. The students considered the internship “appropriate” when the work responsibilities challenged them to advance professionally, which included the development of intellectual capabilities and practical skills.

Equally important to students was the clarity of duties. More specifically, they wanted to know whether the job description was clearly written, and whether the duties were measurable and would result in closure. As one student stated, “There has to be a beginning and end point so I know where I’ll end up.” In general, students believed that clarity of work duties enhanced the accuracy of evaluation by both the academic supervisor and the on-site supervisor.

Students mentioned the following concepts in the scope-of-work category: intensity of work, variety of activities, and range of work duties. For example, students believed that all parties should agree on the number of hours required of them and on a tentative work schedule (intensity). In general, students wanted to know whether they would remain busy or would encounter significant amounts of “down time” while working. Students also questioned whether they would be participating in a variety of activities, or if their duties would require completion of the same activities throughout the internship. Finally, students questioned

whether the range of work duties was concentrated on one task or in one department, or whether they would work across tasks and departments. Students varied in their views of how challenging these factors are. For example, while some students preferred to work in departments across the agency, others felt content to specialize in one area of the agency. Irrespective of the range of work duties, students generally preferred to remain busy and to be challenged by a variety of activities.

Another concept that emerged from data analysis pertained to the degree of respect toward employees. As one student questioned, “How does the agency treat their employees?” Further exploration of this question led to the more specific concern of whether interns were treated with the same respect as full-time employees. In addition, some students questioned whether their gender, ethnicity, age, and/or physical ability would result in differential treatment, especially when students represented a numerical minority.

Closely related to the concept of respect, degree of exploitation also emerged as an important concept in the experiences of interns. All students knew of “horror stories” from previous interns, who had been overworked and not compensated fairly. Students hesitated to question or complain about this form of exploitation because they feared being labeled as “a problem,” which could have a negative impact on the outcome of their internship. More specifically, students feared they would receive a negative recommendation or no recommendation following the internship, which could adversely affect their entrance into the sport industry.

Development of Professional Relationships

The findings revealed that, in addition to developing the professional self, future employment in the sport industry was influenced by opportunities for students to develop professional relationships. The students' examples fell into two subcategories of concepts that led to the development of professional relationships: establishment of a professional reputation and establishment of a professional network.

Establishment of a Professional Reputation. While students acknowledged the significance of their professional reputation on the development of professional relationships and on their accessibility to future employment, they also recognized the importance of maintaining their professional reputation within a sport organization. Students desired access to opportunities that would allow them to develop a favorable reputation. They identified two categories of opportunities that contributed to the establishment of a professional reputation during the internship experience: opportunities to demonstrate value and opportunities for timely feedback and scheduled evaluations.

Opportunities to demonstrate value were associated with completion of a task or project, and they depended on receipt of public recognition for these efforts. More specifically, students expressed concern about “receiving credit”

for the quantity and quality of work they produced, particularly when their contributions (e.g., ideas, products) resulted in financial benefits for the agency. A more thorough investigation of this concern revealed that interns wanted their contributions documented and acknowledged by representatives of the internship agency. This validation of efforts ultimately provided students with opportunities to demonstrate their capabilities (value) and to enhance their reputations as developing professionals.

Having access to opportunities for timely feedback and scheduled evaluations also influenced the establishment of a professional reputation. Students expected feedback while "on the job," as well as summative evaluations of their strengths and weaknesses as a developing professional. In addition to receiving feedback and evaluations from the on-site supervisor and academic supervisor, students suggested that other employees of the agency, particularly those who worked closely with them during the internship experience, could provide valuable information in a nonthreatening manner (e.g., feedback about their quality of work and appropriateness of decisions). Students expected both objective and subjective feedback and valued both verbal and written evaluations. Finally, students stated that the internship would not be valuable to their future employment unless they received a letter of recommendation from both the on-site supervisor and the academic supervisor.

Establishment of a Professional Network. In cases where the internship did not lead directly to full-time employment, students particularly wanted to establish a professional network during the internship. The primary opportunities for networking came from the academic supervisor and the on-site supervisor; however, other individuals from the educational program and/or the internship agency were important as well.

Within the educational program, the networks of sport management faculty, alumni, peers, advisory board members, and general supporters of the program (e.g., guest speakers, donors) were important contacts for students before, during, and after their internship experience. Similarly, students accessed the professional contacts of the on-site supervisor and, when available, the professional networks of other employees within the internship agency. Interns who participated in stage two of the study suggested that access to networking opportunities through the internship agency may ultimately be determined by the status of the on-site supervisor as determined by the following variables: the degree of authority/power within the agency, the degree of visibility and participation within the sport industry, and the degree of respect from colleagues within the sport industry.

Some students also networked with outside professionals who worked for organizations that conducted business with the internship agency. Many times the intern's duties influenced these networking opportunities. For example, a student who sat in a cubicle during the majority of the workday had less opportunity to network with outside profes-

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sionals than someone who served as an agent of the organization in a public forum.

One issue commonly mentioned by students was that some interns received access to networking opportunities that were unavailable to other interns within the same agency. One student provided the following poignant example of this disparity: "We were in the arena when our on-site supervisor walks in with some big wig from the corporate office. He introduced the other intern who was sitting next to me, but didn't bother introducing me. It was like I was invisible." Consistent with the major theme of this study, students expected equal access to networking opportunities, particularly when the contact facilitated future employment in the sport industry.

Discussion and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the needs and concerns of students regarding the internship experience. The emergent theme that explained the data (Rennie, 1998) was that, during the internship experience, students expect access to opportunities that facilitate future employment in the sport industry. The findings of this study constitute a proposed typology that can be used as a resource by students, internship agencies, and academic programs to improve the quality of sport management internships.

When investigating prospective internship experiences, students can use the factors in the typology as criteria for evaluating the availability of opportunities provided by the sport agency, and thus, for determining whether the internship experience is a "good fit" before signing an internship agreement. Therefore, one goal of this typology is to empower students by helping them to make a more informed decision.

The typology can also be used by the internship agency for exploring the scope of opportunities and articulating the expectations of behaviors with interns who have been recently hired. The typology may prove especially effective during the initial internship meeting, when all components are addressed by the academic supervisor, on-site supervisor, and student. Used in this way, the typology encourages open lines of communication so that everyone can be held accountable for decisions and subsequent actions. During this time, students are also afforded opportunities to discuss their concerns and inhibitions, especially when they are scheduled to work in unfamiliar environments.

This typology expands existing internship models by including the needs and concerns of students. Since research has established that the internship is a significant

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ties some internship agencies face in finding the correct means to disseminate their internship information to students. Should the information be sent to career services or to the sport management department? Many colleges and universities have a designated internship coordinator within the sport management program; however, many others do not, and in such instances the agency may not know whom to contact. Regular contact with sport organizations in the area is a proactive strategy that may help to increase awareness of key contacts on campus and ensure that information is sent to the correct person. Agencies should also use resources such as the *SportBusiness Journal's* sport management program listing, which includes contact information.

Relationships between campus internship coordinators and agency supervisors vary considerably but can potentially affect the success of an internship program or experience. Sufficient communication and education must be developed to ensure a meaningful internship experience. Internship programs are developed with structure and specific outcomes in mind. All parties involved—the student, the agency supervisor, and the campus coordinator—must be aware of the desired educational outcomes from the outset of the experience. Agency supervisors will appreciate the educational goals of the internship only if they receive sufficient communication regarding those goals. Education is needed so that agency supervisors will become fully aware of the academic expectations of interns. Similarly, campus internship coordinators must be educated to appreciate the agencies' needs and expectations. Effective communication and education may also provide additional benefits to those in academe by helping to ensure the academic integrity of internship programs. Agency supervisors who understand and support the academic component associated with internships are more able to provide students with supplementary opportunities and to assume a more involved mentoring role.

A final consideration is the need for faculty internship supervisors to recognize timing issues, such as peak work times for specific businesses. For example, intern evaluations are likely to be more comprehensive if the agency supervisor is given sufficient time to complete it. Asking the agency supervisor to develop special projects for the intern may be more successful at certain times of year than at other times. Once students have completed several weeks of the internship, they should be able to assist in this process by ensuring that agency supervisors are made aware of deadlines as early as possible.

The benefits of internships to all parties have been widely recognized, but the potential of some opportunities may not have been maximized. Relationship building between the agency supervisor and the campus coordinator may be the simplest solution to this problem because it will provide communication and understanding regarding the expectations and perspectives of both parties. Interns also must be actively involved in the process, and they can assist in improving communication and understanding as they

progress through their internship experience and become familiar with the organization. Increases in specific communications about outcomes and expectations are likely to lead to a more positive overall experience for the student and the sponsoring agency.

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factor influencing the school-to-work transition, use of this typology can assist faculty in establishing policies for internships at their respective institutions. Moreover, the typology provides faculty with a guide for establishing standard procedures for internship applications. In addition, faculty can use the typology to develop internship agreements that address the needs of students and that assist students in discontinuing internships when a breach of contract has occurred.

Internships contribute significantly to the success of students after graduation. The typology developed in this study places the needs and concerns of students at the center of the internship experience, without ignoring the expectations of the academic curriculum or the sport agency. Given the variety of participants in this study, who represented diverse backgrounds and educational institutions, the proposed typology may be applicable to interns beyond the

scope of this study. To confirm this hypothesis, however, the author suggests further research with a larger sample of sport management students to refine and to evaluate this typology.

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