Back to Basics: Assessing the Writing and Communication Skills of Sport Management Interns

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Dating back to Braisse (1987), Parkhouse (1987) and Desensi et al.’s (1990) early work, it has been widely accepted that high impact practices such as internships are a necessary component of the sport management curriculum. Individual programs set the various standards and procedures for attaining and retaining internships in terms of site selection, credit hours, work requirements, hour requirements, etc. One of the most critical components, however, is the supervisor evaluation of interns’ skills and abilities in a host of areas including but not limited to problem solving, oral communication and writing. Grabel and Lee (2005) found that industry professionals from the major professional sport leagues identified conceptual and oral communication skills as the most relevant for sport management students as they progressed in their internship and entry-level career. Furthermore, Brandon-Lai, Armstrong and Bunds (2016) focused more on the less technical or softer skills such as political skills as a critical component of internship success and early career success.

For the present study, data were gathered from ten years of supervisor final evaluations of interns at various sport organizations (e.g., recreational, collegiate, professional, non-profit). During this period from 2008 to 2018, a total of 654 final supervisor evaluations were collected. Supervisors assessed students during their academic semester-long internship within the following areas: oral communication, writing, attitude, maturity, potential, attendance and dependability. Additionally, a final score was given by each supervisor regarding the student’s overall performance. Analysis of these supervisor evaluations were used to ascertain the areas of strengths and weaknesses for sport management students and their progress during the internship experience. Further discussion on these findings will be conducted in greater detail.

The two areas that internship supervisors identified in need of the most improvement were in the areas of writing and oral communication. While the sport industry is rather dynamic and has seen tremendous change in even the last 10 years, the necessity for strong writing and oral communication skills is as relevant as ever before. While Rae (2007) found that gaps do exist between employer expectations and intern skill sets, the onus ultimate falls on the institutions to adequately prepare their students for a career in the sport industry. Sport management academic programs must work together with their industry partners to design valuable experiential experiences and to develop curriculum in such a way to remain relevant to present industry demands.

Practical implications for this research study will be discussed as they relate to the evaluation of interns from both the industry and academic side. High impact practices such as internships must be broadly assessed for their benefits and it should be noted that this is a limited sample of students from one institution working at various types of sport organizations. Additionally, faculty buy-in is critical to the continued success of such experiential learning and high impact practices in the sport industry.