The Sport Management Internship as a Wicked Problem

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Teaching/Learning - Other (Other) 20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Session: Teaching/Learning

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The purpose of this presentation is to propose that internships in sport management be considered a wicked problem and to advocate for the type of research needed to address the negative externalities that have resulted from the extensive use of internships within sport management education and the sport industry as labor. Wicked problems are problems that have no clear solution, involve multiple interconnected systems, have no central authority, and fixing one problem can cause or uncover other problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Mertens, 2015). Within sport management other scholars have used this framework to study event legacies (Byers, Hayday, & Pappous, 2020), sport policy and development (Sam, 2009), and changing organizational forms (Misener & Misener, 2017).

The internship system benefits sport management programs who are able to place their students in attractive field experiences, while the sport organizations benefit from the flexible and cheap or free labor provided by the students, and the ability to preview potential new hires (Newman, 2014). The mutual dependence of sport management programs and students and the labor market in sport coalesce to create a wicked problem that includes an entanglement of economic, educational, and social issues that cannot be addressed with a single solution by any one actor.

The benefits of internships to students have been repeatedly espoused (DeLuca & Brauinstein-Minkove, 2016; Foster & Dollar, 2017; Sattler, 2018), but there is a growing literature examining a range of detriments. Among the issues are 1) whether internships reliably deliver career-related benefits (Odio, 2017; Odio & Kerwin, 2016), 2) the relative lack of power that interns have in an organization, which can lead to sexual harassment, exploitation and other unethical behavior (Odio, 2019; Hawzen, McLeod, Holden & Newman, 2018), and 3) similar to other fields, students from less privileged backgrounds are more limited in the internship opportunities they can pursue, thus perpetuating and exacerbating existing race, gender, and class disparities (Perlin, 2012; Walker, Agyemang, Washington, Hindman, & MacCharles, in press).

Scholars have noted that traditional statistical analyses of large data sets are not sufficient for wicked problems (Camillus, 2008), and that approaches using mixed methods (Mertens, 2015) and multidisciplinary approaches (Elia & Margherita, 2018) are necessary. In order to begin to address these issues, deeper investigations of professional norms for students, pedagogical strategies by sport management programs, and human resource practices by sport organizations are needed. Viewing internships in sport as a wicked problem provides a lens through which we can begin to examine multiple issues as part of a collective system. This will enable research and discussions specific to the role of sport management education and educators that are not limited to one specific issue and that can begin to identify additional systemic problems. The presentation will draw parallels to other wicked problems and discuss paths to future research that addresses these issues while discussing the pedagogical and practical implications for the relationship between sport management programs and sport organizations.