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Student Experiences with Service-Learning in Sport Management

Bennett, Gregg

Many professors utilize academically-based service-learning in their classes to provide students with an experiential experience. In fact, service-learning has increased in popularity in higher education due mainly to the many perceived benefits of the method. Service-learning is being written about extensively by several authors (Gray, Ondaatje, Fricker, & Geschwind, 2000; Hilosky, Moore, & Reynolds, 2000; Jackowski & Gullion, 1998; Mattson & Shea, 1997; Sutton, 1989; Zlotkowski, 1995), as educators grapple with how to implement this effective means of learning into the curriculum.

While service-learning implementation has increased in higher education curricula throughout the United States, the concept has been around quite a while (Dewey, 1938). In fact, Williams and Lankford (1999) suggest that the concept "dates as far back as Aristotle and is representative of the philosophy embraced by John Dewey" (p. 38). Although there has been a recent call to civic participation and service, it has continually been the responsibility of higher education to teach the principles of a democratic society (Boyer, 1990). In the late 1890's, Harvard University accentuated out-of-the-classroom experiential learning and its encouraging effects on the community. Harvard employed a full-time Director of Student Volunteer Work to coordinate charity work associated with academic courses (Wieckowski, 1992). Dewey was another advocate of higher education's duty to the community. In the 1930's, he declared that higher education is interconnected with societal concerns and dilemmas (Dewey, 1933).

Service-learning has been defined by several scholars (Berson, 1993; Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Drane, 2001; Ehrlich, 1996; Kinsley, 1994). According to Johnson (1995), service-learning is "a process of integrating volunteer community service combined with active guided reflection into the curriculum to enhance and enrich student learning of course material" (p. 1). In other words, students are guided through a volunteer experience that allows them to observe, practice, and/or deliver skills and services that are taught in a classroom. The experience can assist students in making the transition from theoretical understanding to practical application of course concepts. Conversely, service-learning presents students with the opportunity to first learn by doing, and then develop a critical understanding of course content through classroom discussion.

The benefits of service-learning are multi-faceted. One of the major benefits of service-learning is that the experience affords students the opportunity for cultural exposure and the ability to serve the profession in the "real world" (Zlotkowski, 1995). A well-designed service-learning component of a course can benefit the students, participating agencies, and class instructor (Jackowski & Gullion, 1998). Students benefit primarily through the opportunity to practice newly learned skills in a functional and relevant environment (Johnson, 1995). Secondary benefits for students may be of greater importance and include improved social interaction skills, enhanced critical thinking and problem-solving skills, increased awareness of career choices, enhanced awareness of the real world and social responsibility, opportunities for growth through interaction with people from diverse cultures, and additional opportunities to "pad" a resume with necessary applicable work experiences which are so desired by employers (Johnson, 1995; Mattson & Shea, 1997; Sutton, 1989). Servicelearning is also seen as a channel for students to reflect upon personal issues and the meaning of being a part of a community (Bradfield & Myers, 1996; Hammond, 1994; Yates & Youniss, 1998). Rhoads (1998) contends that service-learning provides an avenue for students to explore personal values, increase understanding of diversity issues, and broaden their discernment of social good in the community context.

The advantages to the community and participating agencies are equally important. Community agencies collaborating with universities in service-learning projects often receive free support and consultation from the university, as faculty

members strive to develop the best learning environment for their students (Johnson, 1995). Agencies that employ a service-learning program can also use their contact with students to promote future recruitment efforts. In many disciplines where openings exceed applicants, attempts to recruit new employees can be competitive. Finally, on the surface, it may appear as if the agencies will have access to free employee service. However, agencies should be reminded that, while service-learning can provide increased human resources, the nature of service-learning demands that students are nurtured through the experience, a somewhat time-consuming procedure.

Most faculty that utilize service experiences within the framework of their classes are aware of the benefits of service-learning for the course instructor as well as the university. These faculty members recognize that new approaches to service delivery often originate in the field, as opposed to the university lab or classroom (Johnson, 1995). According to a national survey of undergraduate faculty, 80% believe that students should be encouraged to participate in community service (Sax & Astin, 1997). Instructors who coordinate with agencies to provide service-learning will often have an opportunity to learn these new service techniques before they reach the textbooks. This infusion of new information helps to keep the instructor up-to-date with innovative programming, resulting in an improved professional preparation program. Service-learning also provides the university a forum for creating a positive public image by fulfilling a sense of moral obligation to the community (Jackowski & Gullion, 1998). Successful service-learning programs improve the public's image of the university that, in turn, provides more opportunities for fundraising and resource development (Berson, 1993; Jacoby, 1994).

As service-learning has multiple benefits to members of the university community, several disciplines of study have utilized this learning tool as course components. Service-learning components have been adopted and utilized by sport management faculty and programs. According to Valerius, Keller, Doyle, & Collins (1998), the literature is filled with service-learning experiences of college students in sport management settings. The purpose of this study was to discuss the service-learning experiences of students in sport management classes.

Method

Participants

Participants included 157 students enrolled in four sport management courses at two universities located in the southeastern United States. Participants at one university were enrolled in two sections of an introductory sport management class, while the other students were enrolled in both sport ethics and sport law classes. Students enrolled in the classes in the spring semester of 2001 were assigned a minimum of 15 hours of service learning as a requirement for the courses. The participants were largely male (77.7%) with an average age of 21.4 (SD = 1.3).

Service-learning Component

As previously discussed, service-learning can be an effective avenue for introducing students to a particular discipline. The content of the courses selected was ideally suited for a service-learning experience, as a major objective of the classes was to introduce students to the management aspects of sport. The courses were also intended to provide an overview of the history, foundation, and career opportunities in the sport industry. Focus was on the development of job placement skills, career research, resume building, practicum/internship preparation, and increasing knowledge concerning the various aspects of the sport management industry. Students were, in effect, introduced to the field of sport management through these courses.

Students were required to select from several opportunities that the instructors had garnered from local and regional constituents. Some of the constituents were recreation directors, athletic directors, university officials, and area schools.

The students were required to sign up for fifteen hours with a contact person whom the instructors identified on the first day of class. The instructor made preemptive inquiries into the type of work experience the individual constituents could provide for the students. A contract between the students and the constituents was developed and agreed upon prior to

a student's service experience. Once the service was completed, the instructor contacted the constituent, either electronically or by phone to obtain an appraisal of the service completed by the students. Constituents were asked to describe the behavior of the students and the progress they made toward their predetermined experiential objectives.

Instrument

A 39-item survey instrument was constructed for use in the present study and was administered after the completion of the service hours. The first portion of the questionnaire (items 1-4) requested information from the students regarding the time commitment of the required service hours. Section two solicited four responses (items 5-8) to opinion statements regarding their level of preparation prior to, during, and after completion of the service-learning experience. Two items (9, 10) assessed respondent perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of the experience. The third portion of the questionnaire (items 11-32) requested student perceptions of their service-learning experiences in the classes. This portion of the questionnaire allowed for students to include narrative statements regarding their experience with each item. These qualitative openended responses are included in the results. Item 33 measured the overall value of the service-learning experience, while two open-ended questions assessed the benefits (item 34) and disadvantages (item 35) of the experience. The final portion of the instrument solicited demographic information from the respondents. The content validity of the initial survey was evaluated first by a panel of four experts (three sport management faculty members with extensive knowledge of servicelearning as an academic component, and one social scientist researcher specializing in scale construction) who were asked to judge the item's acceptance. The experts were then asked to comment on the relevance, "representativeness," and clarity of items and provide suggestions for improving the questionnaire. All four academicians were familiar with social learning theory. Minor corrections were made.

Students responded to the questionnaire via the Internet. A hyperlink was provided to each student in the classes. Each respondent navigated the link, responded to each item and then submitted his/her responses by clicking on the "Submit" icon at the end of the questionnaire. Each response was immediately routed to a database set up specifically to identify data from the questionnaire. Data were analyzed using SPSS (v. 10.07).

Results

These results suggest that the service-learning experiences actively engaged the students as opposed to a more passive observational experience. Several questions were asked concerning the level of preparation and challenge of the experience. The students responded to a seven-point, Likert-type scale anchored from strongly disagree (1), to strongly agree (7). In general, students responded favorably to the statement, "I was fully prepared for the duties I had in the experience," with a mean well above the scale midpoint ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.49$). The fact that this distribution was negatively skewed suggests a stronger favorable response than perhaps was indicated by the mean (skewness = -1.01 , Median = 6.00). When responding to the statement, "I was asked to do things that challenged my abilities," the students were somewhat less agreeable ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 1.87$). Together, these responses suggest that the students felt well prepared for their service-learning experience but perhaps not as challenged by the experience as they could have been.

Two items were used to assess general impact of the experience on the students' understanding of sport management as a field: (a) "I have a better understanding of sport management because of the service-learning experience," and (b) "The service-learning experience did not increase my knowledge of the sport management field." Responses to these items were in the expected directions regarding impact but were not as strong due to increased variability of the students' perceptions ($M = 4.54$, $SD = 2.17$ and $M = 3.19$, $SD = 2.15$, respectively).

Advantages and Disadvantages

The second portion of the survey evaluated the students' perceived advantages and disadvantages of the service-learning experience. Students were presented a list of possible advantages and disadvantages and asked to check all that apply. There also was an "Other" category, which allowed students to write in their own response. Table 1 presents the

percentage a given item was endorsed.

Regarding advantages, the students were quite varied in their responses. However, the majority of respondents noted that improved social interaction skills, resume building, awareness of social responsibility, development of "real world" skills, and interaction with others of diverse cultures were all important. It is interesting, and encouraging to note the mix of practical outcomes with cultural/social issues. Only a few persons chose to respond to the "Other" category. Disadvantages were also varied but, in general, were much less frequently endorsed than advantages. Relevance of the experiences to the "real world" were clearly viewed as a strength; an important outcome of service-learning. Again, a few respondents wrote in their own response in the "Other" category. However, several of these were comments concerning students' desire to do additional service experiences or that they wished they had more time to contribute. When these responses are considered, students' self-declared disadvantages become nil. Other disadvantages likely stem primarily from poor matches between student interests and service requirements.

Service-Learning Impact

The third portion of the survey consisted of a series of 21 opinion items that assessed an array of perspectives. These items were grouped into categories that corresponded to four themes identified by the qualitative data: (a) Commitment to Serve, (b) Exposure to the Discipline, (c) Theoretical Application, and (d) (for those working with youth) Appreciation of Youth Sport. One additional category was captured by two quantitative items assessing the students' personal enjoyment and fulfillment in the experiences. The students rated the degree to which each item was true for them on a seven-point, Likert scale anchored at (1) not true, to (7) very true. Respondents were likewise allowed to respond to each statement by adding additional information on their perceptions of the statement in an open-ended format.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and coefficient alpha for scores from these items, grouped by category. Score reliabilities ranged from acceptable to very strong. The mean of most responses were above the midpoint of the scale, suggesting overall agreement with the items. The results in Table 2 were informed by the openended responses to the items and by the qualitative responses garnered at the end of the survey regarding the benefits and disadvantages of service-learning. This mixed methodology provided a more detailed picture regarding the students' service-learning experiences, as opposed to sole reliance on the quantitative survey data. Constant comparative qualitative data analysis resulted in the four themes presented in Table 2. These themes are reflective of the items queried by the questionnaire. These results are presented in the next section.

Commitment to Serve

Table 2 suggests that the students were positively impacted in their commitment to serve. Qualitative data supported this finding and many students developed an appreciation for helping others. Some of the participants also noted an enhanced realization of the need for social responsibility. One of the students that worked with underprivileged youth in a free-throw competition stated that it was "wonderful to have so much fun while helping children in the community." He also asked the organization to contact him next year so he could volunteer again. Most of the students indicated they would like to be involved with community service again, even if it were not a part of their class responsibilities. Other reactions from students included:

Sports managers really work hard at what they do and I found that out. I figured community or service learning was something that I could do after graduation or while I was in grad school. The only thing is that it doesn't pay, but that can be waived by the experience that I will obtain.

I really enjoyed being able to help out children that were less fortunate than myself. Sometimes they just need to know that someone cares.

I learned what it means to have patience and how these programs are an asset to the community because they keep the kids off the streets.

I did not realize the need for volunteers in our community until this experience, I will definitely help out again in the future.

Exposure to the Discipline

Exposure to the Discipline was the least strongly endorsed category, with several item means below the scale midpoint. However, open-ended responses to these items suggested a generally favorable response. Therefore these results are less definitive with varied perspectives from the quantitative and qualitative data.

Qualitative responses suggested the service-learning projects provided students with an opportunity to expose themselves to actual operations of sport management organizations. It is possible that this category of questions in the survey was not as strongly rated due to mismatches between student interests and organizational experiences and requirements. Many of the participants worked with the university's athletic department or a local city's recreation department. One of the students that volunteered with the university stated that he did not realize the "complexity of the athletic department" until he was immersed in some of the day-to-day operations. Another student parlayed his experience with the city into a job with the Recreation Department as a supervisor of softball league officials. Other comments included:

This experience really gave me the opportunity to experience what sport management is all about.

The service-learning experience made me open my eyes and see that everything is not always a bed of roses. If you want those roses there, then someone has to put them there and that someone is you.

The service-learning experience provided some of these students with the opportunity to evaluate their career choices. One of the participants stated that she "did not enjoy the administrative aspect of her service-learning experience," and felt that sport management was likely not a career path for her as she really wanted to "have more of a direct influence on children." The following statements from students reiterate the feeling that working in the sport industry involves quite a commitment:

The amount of effort that goes into a youth football league is hard to comprehend until you actually got involved. I am now aware of what the organizers have to go through for even just game day preparations.

Working with the university's athletic marketing department opened my eyes to actual activities that I will be involved in when I graduate. It was a wonderful experience for me.

It takes a special person to work in sport management, someone who is willing to put in very long hours.

Theoretical Application

Service-learning allows students the chance to apply concepts learned in the classroom to real world settings (Sutton, 1989). While several Theoretical Application items were strongly endorsed in Table 2, the lack of uniformity points to a possible need for increased effort to connect classroom content with real world applicability. Of course, this is no easy goal, particularly when students engage in a myriad of service-learning experiences. Many of the students noted the opportunity to try out concepts learned in class in an actual sport management situation as a major benefit of their service-learning experience. Some of the students mentioned that their in-class lectures were easier to understand and comprehend because of their service-learning experience. Others stated that the concepts in class were more understandable now that they have seen them applied in an actual sport management setting.

One student related that he was now able to "correlate class discussions to real situations." Another student that worked with underprivileged children stated that he "did not realize so many people in our town needed help and support." he had not been exposed to the problems encountered by those children and said he was glad he had the opportunity to

serve them. A student that worked with the university's athletic marketing department stated that he was "finally able to understand some of the business concepts he was taught in class" after working on a promotional campaign for the basketball and volleyball programs. By enabling undergraduates to understand issues in a more realistic way, service-learning compliments concepts that are being taught in class. Some of the students' reactions to applying classroom concepts to their service-learning experience included:

I thought I would never use anything from my accounting class until the agency director asked me to help him with some budget items. I was glad to know that I actually remembered some of the procedures.

I tried some of the management concepts we learned about in class when I was coaching the youth football team and they really worked. It was fun to realize that I was learning something I could use in the future.

After my service experience, I realize how important it is to understand the concepts we talked about in class. I used them a lot.

Appreciation of Youth Sport

Another positive aspect of service-learning gained by many of the participants was an appreciation for youth sport. Many of the students worked with the city's youth recreation program. A student that volunteered as a youth flag football coach stated that it was "one of the most rewarding experiences of my life." Another student mentioned that she was surprised by the "appreciation shown by the kids" when she served as a game organizer for the youth flag football program. One of the students organized a raffle to help support area high school golf teams. He said he chose this project for the purpose of helping the youth because he wished someone would have "been there to support me when I participated in high school golf."

Youth sports continue to prosper in our country, and exposure to them could lead to possible job opportunities in the future for dedicated and qualified individuals. Some of the students plan to continue their involvement with youth sports as evidenced by the following comments:

I really enjoyed working with the kids. I plan to help coach little league baseball this summer.

My experience with the kids was wonderful. I hope I can find a job working with them when I graduate.

Some of the kids were brats, but I still had a good time. I plan to help with the league again next year.

Personal Enjoyment/Fulfillment and Overall Evaluation

Two survey items were asked to assess personal fulfillment and enjoyment from the service-learning experience. Table 2 reports strong ratings for these items. "I came away from the service experience feeling good about myself" was typical of comments made by students in the classes.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate the overall value of their service-learning experience from (1) no value, to (7) tremendous value. On average, the students rated the value of their experience highly ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 1.78$). Given that the distribution of scores was strongly negatively skewed (skewness = -1.20), the median (6.00) suggests an even stronger perceived value of service-learning.

Discussion

The results of this inquiry indicate that servicelearning can be a positive requirement for sport management classes. These respondents reported many advantages, and few disadvantages, of having a service requirement in their sport management classes. Respondents reported that service experiences improve social interaction skills, resume building,

awareness of social responsibility, development of practical skills, and interaction with others of diverse cultures.

Positive outcomes were likewise reported under the category of Commitment to Serve. It appears that the experience allowed most of the students to develop an appreciation of serving others. The enhancement of social responsibility is a very important finding, and particularly noteworthy. Thus, requiring service-learning can provide students with an experience that will aid their development as socially conscious sport managers.

The outcomes of the experience were also positive for those individuals that worked with young people. This is an important finding as youth sport is the foundation of our sport culture. Placing college students in a setting to aid the development of young athletes can have an incredibly positive impact on both parties. Many of the students indicated that they will likely continue to serve youth after they receive their degrees. Certainly, youth programs need solid leaders who have obtained prior skill, and service-learning could afford many undergraduate students with this needed experience.

The respondents likewise reported that they valued their service experiences. There was overall positive evaluation of the service-learning impact items, and the students rated the overall value of the service-learning experiences quite highly. Since field experience, including practicum, internships and service-learning, are required in the overwhelming majority of sport management curricula throughout the United States, these findings are important and noteworthy.

The highest rated advantages were an interesting mix of practical and social/cultural issues. This is an encouraging finding regarding the global impact of the experiences on the students. Real world experience was rated high as an advantage, and low as a disadvantage. This is evidence of the perceived practicality and relevance of the experiences.

However, there were some findings reported by these respondents which warrant some inspection. These results are especially important as many sport management academicians require service-learning experiences. For example, while the respondents were well prepared, they reported that they were not challenged enough by the experience. This may speak to a need to identify service-learning experiences that stretch the abilities of the students. From a constructivist learning theory perspective, Vygotsky's (1978) (e.g., Wertsch, 1991; Woolfolk, 1998) concept of real-world experiences occurring in the "zone of proximal development" may be relevant here. It is possible that the students were prepared (as evidenced by their survey responses) but not quite operating at the point to optimally challenge the students and facilitate learning, and therefore many may not have maximized their service-learning opportunity. Nevertheless, the primary objective of the requirement was to afford the students the experience of serving, not to challenge them, on a cognitive or professional level, per se. Of course, experiences that both expose students to service roles as well as facilitate learning of sport management issues and concepts would be ideal. This goal may prove to be elusive, however, given the unique interests of individual students and the limited number of service-learning opportunities available within a community

The reported mixed results concerning Exposure to the Discipline may be closely related to the lack of challenge indicated by the participants. The results do not strongly endorse the notion that these participants were exposed to the discipline of sport management through their service experiences. Again, the goal of the experience was to complete service in the community by connecting it to management concepts. Perhaps these findings were due to mismatches between student interests and organizational requirements. If the student experience was not closely related to his/her interest, then he/she may have not perceived that he/she experienced the field in the optimal manner. In fact, many of the students did not complete service requirements directly related to sport management. It is possible that the less definitive results on this point are due to responses of these students.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding of the study centers on the connection of theoretical constructs to the experience. The cornerstone of service-learning experiences is to afford students the opportunity to connect the concepts taught in class to the experience. Furthermore, the Theoretical Application responses point to the importance of connecting class discussion to real world experiences. While this is a challenge, the congruence between theory and practice is an important one for all sport management classes. This finding raises several questions, many of which should be explored

through further empirical investigation. The increased variability of responses concerning the impact of the experience on the students' knowledge and understanding of the field is worth noting. A point of future research might be to examine in more detail the experiences of those indicating less impact on their understanding of the field in effort to determine commonality of experiences for these students. This type of information could be used to identify experiences more tailored to the needs of the students.

Conclusion

Lately, the plea for student involvement within the community has been a recurring theme in higher education. The desire for students to learn beyond the traditional classroom environment has been well documented. Student involvement with the community provides practical experience while also instilling a sense of social responsibility. The service-learning aspect of the introductory sport management course described here is an excellent example of one method to be used in answering the need for social integration of students' learning experiences. The constituents of the community also benefited from the interaction with students. Efforts such as the service-learning project can take considerable time and energy to organize, but the benefits are tremendous considering the ability for this type of educational experience to influence students for the remainder of their lives.

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