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## Sport Management Experiential Learning: Faculty Perceptions of Opportunities, Benefits, and Support

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# Sport Management Experiential Learning: Faculty Perceptions of Opportunities, Benefits, and Support

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Experiential learning is an important aspect of any learning program, but in sport management programs, it might be considered essential to the learning process and post-graduation career success and is a key component of the COSMA accreditation process. Some types of experiential learning include in-classroom activities, internships, practica, cooperatives, and service learning. In many instances, more than one type of experiential learning is being used to enrich the student's experience and prepare them for post-graduate careers. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiential learning opportunities available in collegiate sport management programs in the United States. This study utilizes interviews and open-ended questionnaire responses to look at experiential learning in sport management programs within the United States. Overall, there were 30 participants, ranging from small to large institutions, public and private, as well as teaching and research institutions. Four themes were present after reviewing the data: a variety of internships and experiential learning opportunities, practical application, networking, and resources available to faculty. The themes presented showed the importance of experiential learning opportunities, the range of experiences in sport management programs, and the perceptions of the faculty.

**Keywords:** *Experiential learning, faculty perceptions, networking, internships*

Experiential learning is a form of education that emphasizes learning through real-world experiences, rather than solely traditional classroom learning. Experiential education engages students in active learning through direct experience and focused reflection (AEE.org, 2023). Learning encounters include internships, service learning, practica, and other positions (NIU.edu, 2012). These opportunities allow for students to engage in nontraditional education. While traditional classes involve a conventional system of education which includes lectures, class discussions, group work, and case studies, nontraditional education involves an alternative approach to learning. One of those approaches includes experiential learning. Many university sport management programs use experiential learning as a form of education for students and provide college credit for students engaging in active learning. Sport management programs vary in the titles of the credit-bearing courses including internships, practica, and service learning. Brown et al. (2018) provided several definitions of experiential learning. All have a common theme of learning by doing whether that is in the classroom or a different setting including

internships, volunteer experiences, or service-learning experiences related to a course subject.

Sport management is a continuously growing academic field and career choice. Students must be prepared to enter the industry; therefore, the experiences and knowledge gained through internships and other experiential learning opportunities are crucial to future job placements (Dees & Hall, 2012). The purpose of this study is to understand the availability of experiential learning opportunities in sport management programs, the perceived benefits of those opportunities, and the support systems in place for faculty.

## Literature Review

Experiential learning is an active process of learning through doing and an educational process in which students take the knowledge from the classroom to the field. More than just reading and discussing issues, experiences in the work environment may help students decide their career path before they leave the academic setting. Over 80% of sport management programs in the United States require students to complete an internship (Brown et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2008). While most programs require some type of internship for graduation, the requirements, including

credit hours, and hours of experience vary by program. Brown et al. (2018) and Jones et al. (2008) showed that sport management programs should be developed in such a way that offer students the best possible internship experience to benefit them in finding employment post-graduation. Guidotti et al. (2023) stated, “sport management higher education programs still lack a distinct competence framework to bridge the knowledge gap between employment demands, students’ preparedness, and skills development strategies” (p. 2). Jones et al. (2008) also discussed that practicum and internship experiences should move from general experiences to more in-depth and detailed experiences as the student progresses through their degree program. This will set students up for success post-graduation. For those programs seeking or who have been granted accreditation, the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) requires programs to meet this characteristic of excellence in sport management education: “The sport management academic unit recognizes the role of practical and experiential learning as a relevant component of sport management curricula” (COSMA, 2024, p. 7).

### **Experiential Learning Opportunities**

Experiential learning eases the transition from the classroom to employment by allowing students to experience situations that may occur when they leave school (King, 2009; Pierson & Troppe, 2010; Schneider & Stier, 2006). In addition, these experiences should occur throughout the student’s time at the institution and not just at the end of the academic program (Sattler, 2018). Experiential learning is developing into a necessary part of the sport management education experience. Dees and Hall (2012) discussed the need for qualified applicants moving into the sport industry which makes experiential learning and internship opportunities necessary. These experiences are crucial when applying for jobs because sport organizations continue to hire employees with management and communication skills. This educational process is imperative to help students learn by experiencing situations that may occur in a job setting.

Some programs embed experiential learning within courses to provide students with experience throughout their time in their program and before graduating. According to Cohen and Nite (2019), to close the “gaps between classroom knowledge and real-world experience, experiential learning is becoming a growing part of university curricula and professional development courses alike” (p. 2). University courses have been developed in which students have completed experiential learning within the curriculum to connect classroom learning to event experience (Dees & Hall, 2012; McKelvey & Southall, 2008; Pierce et al., 2011). Wanless et al. (2016) studied two courses that embedded experiential learning within the curriculum. One course allowed students to engage in ticket sales for an event. Another course provided the students with marketing and fundraising skills which the students used at a golf tournament. Implementing experiential learning opportunities into the course curriculum gave students an edge over other applicants within the sport industry. Colleges have implemented ticket sales, event management, sport sales, and sponsorship sales opportunities within courses (Birmingham et al., 2021; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; DeLuca & Fornatora, 2020; McKelvey & Southall, 2008; Pierce et al., 2011).

Additional experiences outside the classroom complement students’ knowledge and skill set. Askren and James (2021) discussed the necessity for students to have in-classroom experiences and visit facilities and venues to give the students a better understanding of the industry. While visiting the facilities, students have worked at an event to receive experience. Facility and event managers have utilized student labor in areas of an event while the student gains the needed experience for their resume. Outside the classroom, experiences have helped students decide their future career paths (Cunningham et al., 2005; Lu & Kuo, 2016).

### **Faculty and Experiential Learning**

Dewey (1938) posited that the value of the experience was key, and the burden should fall on the educator to provide worthwhile experiences that influence students’ forthcoming careers. Further

studying Dewey's theory of experiential learning, Kolb and Kolb (2005) stated that combining students' interests and academic encounters strengthened educational efficacy. Continuing to build on Dewey's experiential learning theory, Ord and Leather (2011) discussed the experiential learning cycle of plan, do, review. Brown et al. (2018) applied Dewey's experiential learning theory to a sport management internship program to study the effect of experiential learning on students while participating in an internship. The quality of the learning experience, the student's reflection on their experience, and the educator's role in the experience were key to the knowledge gained and outcomes of future career choices made by the students.

It is important to understand how faculty perceive experiential learning, and how they prepare themselves and students to manage the internship/experiential learning process. Faculty attitudes toward experiential learning are important in how they perceive the experience the students are about to undergo (Sattler, 2018). Faculty and program directors should be actively involved in arranging opportunities for students to fulfill the requirement to complete necessary internship hours. They should work with the onsite internship supervisors to be sure that students are gaining the most out of their experiences (Birmingham et al., 2021). Brown et al. (2018) discussed the need for the stakeholders in the internship experience – which include the on-site supervisor, the faculty member, and the university administration – to be intrinsically motivated to help the student realize the best possible experience while participating in an internship. Kelley (2004) posited that the quality of the learning experience for a student rests with the administrator of the sport management program, the internship coordinator, and the site supervisor.

Faculty have stated the lack of resources, time, and available internships results in lower rates of experiential learning (Sattler, 2018). The variance in resources and support for faculty to accomplish the needed experiential learning may be the reason for the low rates of opportunities at universities (Sattler, 2018). The workload and lack of travel funds for off-campus opportunities may also hinder experiential

learning. The COSMA accreditation process may assist these programs in leveraging resources in this important area (COSMA, 2024).

## Purpose and RQ

This study aims to understand experiential learning opportunities within various collegiate sport management programs. More specifically, this study focuses on the experiential learning opportunities available to students, access to these experiences, the faculty's role in providing these opportunities, and the support provided.

Therefore, our research questions are:

RQ1: What experiential learning opportunities are offered to students in the sport management program?

RQ2: What are the faculty perceptions of the benefits of experiential learning opportunities provided through their sport management programs?

RQ3: What resources are available to faculty when assisting students with experiential learning opportunities?

## Methods

This study was conducted in two parts: interviews and a questionnaire. Upon gaining IRB approval, the researchers began the participant solicitation process. Initially, data was collected through interviews only. Participants were solicited via email through sport management organization listservs for the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) and the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA). The recruitment email asked for faculty members who were decision-makers within their respective departments or programs.

Potential interview participants were provided with a brief description of the study and were instructed to complete an interest form via a link included in the email. Participants self-selected to participate and the researchers reached out via email to schedule a Zoom interview. During the recruitment process, 19 potential participants completed the interest form. All potential participants were sent an

email to schedule the interview, however, 16 individuals responded and participated in the study.

All interviews were conducted via the online video conferencing platform Zoom and lasted approximately 20-45 minutes. Participants were directed to complete an online consent form before the start of the interview. The Zoom interviews were recorded, and transcripts were generated for each interview utilizing the transcript feature on the platform. The format for the interviews was semi-structured interviews that allowed researchers to ask follow-up questions based on responses. These transcripts were saved and compared with the recorded video to correct any errors. Once the transcripts were updated, they were sent to each participant to review for errors or misunderstandings before being analyzed for themes. Member checking was important to make sure the information and intention provided were correct (Merriam, 2009). The Zoom interview phase of data collection lasted approximately 13 months.

After the conclusion of the interviews, there were 16 participants. A colleague suggested asking the interview questions in the form of an online questionnaire to gain additional participants. The questions used for the interviews were turned into an open-ended questionnaire using Google Forms. No additional data was collected beyond the same interview questions except institution type, pseudonym, and number of students and faculty in their sport management program. Due to a change in the data collection method, an updated IRB approval was acquired. The new recruitment email and questionnaire were sent out to the same set of listservs. The informed consent was included at the beginning of the online questionnaire and participants could opt out at any time while completing the online form. While the researchers were able to gain additional information and participants, some of the data collected was not as rich as the interviews since the questionnaire did not allow the researchers to follow up or clarify any comments provided. The online questionnaire phase of data collection lasted approximately six months.

At the end of data collection, there were 16 interviewees and 14 participants who responded to the online questionnaire for a total of 30 participants. It is

difficult to determine a potential sample size since not all decision-making faculty may participate in the listservs used in this study. All participants were from colleges and universities within the United States. Nearly half (14 participants) were from four-year, private, teaching institutions. This was the largest group based on institution type. The next largest groups included five from four-year, public, teaching institutions, and four from four-year, R1, public institutions. See Table 1 for a breakdown of participants by institution type.

**Table 1**

*Participant Table by Institution Type*

School	Participants
4 Year, Private, Teaching	14
4 Year, Public, Teaching	5
4 Year, Private, R1	1
4 Year, Public, R1	4
4 Year, Private, R2	1
4 Year, Public, R2	2
4 Year, Private	1
4 Year, Public	1
2 Year, Community College	1

The location of the sport management programs varied greatly as well. The largest portion of the participants' programs were housed in a business school (11) with the next largest in health (9), followed distantly by education (3). The remainder of the programs were fairly evenly distributed between professional studies, sciences, communications, and hospitality, recreation, and tourism. See Table 2 for a breakdown of where sport management programs are housed.

**Table 2**

*Participant Table by Program Location*

Program Housed	Participants
Business	11
Health	9
Education	3
Professional Studies	2
Hospitality, Recreation, Tourism	2
Sciences	2

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 Communications 1
 

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The sizes of the sport management programs varied greatly among the participants as well as the number of faculty for each program. Program sizes ranged from 30 students to 1000 students. See Table 3 for program size and faculty numbers. The type of institution did not correlate with program size as some private teaching schools had large enrollments and some did not. The same can be said for public teaching and R1 institutions. In addition, the number of sport management faculty varied as well. Two programs have just one faculty member and some have up to 15 sport management faculty.

**Table 3***Participant Program Profile*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Type of University</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Faculty</b>
Bailey	4 Year, Private, Teaching	40	4
Oliver	4 Year, Private, Teaching	265	6
Craig	4 Year, Private, Teaching	200	6
Duck	4 Year, Private, Teaching	45	1
Abigail	4 Year, Private, Teaching	30	2
Ed	4 Year, Private, Teaching	125	4
Cali Girl	4 Year, Private, Teaching	1000	6
Casey	4 Year, Private, Teaching	125	3
Reggie	4 Year, Private, Teaching	125	2
Susan A	4 Year, Private, Teaching	250	6
Katy	4 Year, Private, Teaching	160	4
CJC	4 Year, Private, Teaching	187	4
Thomas J	4 Year, Private, Teaching	175	3
Sebastian	4 Year, Private, Teaching	200	5
Lily	4 Year, Public, Teaching	450	10
Doctor	4 Year, Public, Teaching	120	6
Emily	4 Year, Public, Teaching	200	4
Bill F	4 Year, Public, Teaching	60	6
Sue	4 Year, Public, Teaching	500	11
Steven	4 Year, Private, R1	305	10
Techie	4 Year, Public, R1	350	9

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Meg A	4 Year, Public, R1	320	4
Tanner	4 Year, Public, R1	311	5
Bob	4 Year, Public, R1	175	7
Mary	4 Year, Private, R2	130	15
Alex	4 Year, Public, R2	65	3
David H	4 Year, Public, R2	550	8
Margo	4 Year, Private	71	1
Goldfish	4 Year, Public	219	4
Planning	2 Year, Community College	800	13

Both Creswell (2013) and Merriam (2009) discussed the steps for coding and determining themes from qualitative data. Coding is defined by Creswell (2013) as “aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the code...and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 184). The transcripts and responses from the online questionnaires were reviewed. Both researchers utilized open coding to find commonalities from the interviews and responses. Once the coding was completed, the researchers met, discussed the common ideas, and sorted them into themes. The researchers utilized peer evaluation by asking a colleague familiar with the study to assist in determining the codes and themes present. Triangulation was established by utilizing member-checking, peer evaluation, and video-recorded interviews. The themes were reviewed, and some were combined to create a more robust theme. The results section will discuss the themes found in this study.

## Results

The participants were forthcoming with their answers to the questions posed and presented interesting information on experiential learning and internships at their universities. The themes found in this study include the variety of internships and experiential learning opportunities, practical application, networking, and resources available to faculty.

### Variety of experiential learning and internship opportunities

Thirty participants discussed experiential learning as a way for students to further understand the concepts learned in the classroom and the need for students to understand how the sport industry works firsthand. Internships are where students complete work at a site, including in an office, overseeing an event, or managing team needs that last a semester or summer. Twenty-seven participants discussed students working several hours at off-campus facilities to gain credit to graduate. For example, “Bailey” said, “Our university is close to a [large recreational facility] which provides many opportunities for students.” Another participant stated that while their school is not located in a major metropolitan area, there is an abundance of opportunities available to students in the local area. These may be with a youth sports team, recreational facility, Boys and Girls Club, or a partnership with an organization. Eleven participants discussed having partnerships with local businesses, so students have places to complete the internship requirement and help the students expand their networks. “Oliver” said, “We have connections in the area, we will certainly connect them [the students] to a person who might have an internship opportunity.” Collaborations with the YMCA, youth sports teams, and other sports organizations presented students with a chance to apply their knowledge in the community context. “Margo” stated, “We have great connections and we have great relationships with organizations in the area and frankly now across the country too.”

Off-campus internships may be difficult for students who do not have transportation and might only have on-campus experiences (e.g., athletic departments, campus recreation centers) available.

Four participants stated students need a car to access quality experiences off-campus.

Seven participants discussed the institution's location as a weakness for their program as they are not close to large athletic sport facilities in which students could have game experience. For example, "Sebastian" indicated, "Geography is a bit challenging as there are not too many local options for students to gain experience."

Other participants talked about experiential learning opportunities that were short-term in nature, such as a few days to a week, such as working the week before the Super Bowl at the Super Bowl Experience and then the Super Bowl game. Students worked as guest service representatives directing fans in the stadium, handling parking issues, ticketing, and other event management related duties. Five participants spoke about students working at conference championships, March Madness, and the MLB All-Star games. "Ed" mentioned taking his students to the Super Bowl, Final Four, and the college football game playoff each year to give his students experience in a professional setting. "Tanner" discussed sending 45 students to the Ryder Cup (PGA event) for several days to run ticket operations and volunteer in other areas at the event. He then mentioned sending 10 students to the Super Bowl to work. "Doctor" mentioned having students work at four different Super Bowls in the four years they were in college. He said, "You have four different Super Bowls on your resume that is getting to the top of that pile of 1,000 applicants." These professional events gave the students first-hand knowledge of working in a specialized setting as well as having the experience to put on their resumes before they leave college. "Craig" mentioned:

... where we're located can be challenging...  
We take them to a [large collegiate facility].  
They [the students] tour the athletic facilities,  
and campus rec, meet the staff, and spend 3 to  
4 hours with the staff to get some outside  
perspective.

Six participants discussed taking their students to a sport arena for a tour, to network with industry professionals, and then to work a game. "Ed" stated the university is located one hour from a large city and can

take his students to a professional sport facility for a day. He said, "We have a relationship with the [professional football team] where we go there and work security for the game."

### *Experiential Learning in the Curriculum*

Seven participants discussed embedding an experiential learning opportunity within their classes or including mini-internship experiences written into the curriculum. "Mary" said, "We also include a considerable amount of experiential/problem-based learning in all of our SPM courses - working with on-campus and off-campus partners." Seven individuals described teaching event management or facility classes where students are required to work events on campus while in the class to gain some experience. "Bob" said, "Many courses offer one-off experiential components." These experiences included the athletic department on campus or a partnership with an organization or local youth group. "Emily" stated, "We require hours in a few classes, plus many classes incorporate a partner-based class project." "Reggie" stated, "Many of our courses partner with sport organizations for experiential learning." By working on projects, students applied the classroom knowledge to an actual event and learned communication, technical skills, and developed analytical and critical thinking skills.

Participants mentioned the need for students to participate in internships and experiential learning opportunities to gain various experiences that will help them in the future. "Katy" stated, "I think it [experiential learning] is important as every industry professional I speak with articulates the need for students to gain industry experience before graduation." "Susan A." mentioned, "Experiential learning is a key component of the program." "Bob" said, "It is sought by employers, so beneficial to students as a culmination of their studies."

### **Practical Application**

Experiential learning opportunities provided practical application of theories to real-life situations and were seen as crucial for developing usable skills that go beyond theoretical knowledge. Through hands-on experiences, students enhanced skills relevant to



their field, including management and decision-making skills as well as communication and interpersonal skills. “Reggie” stated, “We place significant value on students building professional relationships, conducting informational interviews, and completing internships.” The practical experiences gained through experiential learning are highly valued by faculty. These opportunities provided students with a taste of the real-world challenges and dynamics of the sport management field. Faculty believed that hands-on experience is a powerful complement to classroom learning. Students need to learn the area within the sport management industry in which they enjoy working and find appealing. “Alex” said, “It hones in on what they really like to do, or what they don’t want to do, while at the same time expanding their vision.” “Margo” stated, “Students with experiential learning internships will separate themselves from the rest of the people vying for jobs. The students become the top contenders for jobs as they separate themselves from the group.” Through practical application, students developed skills that make them employable.

### ***Employability***

There was a strong belief that students who participated in experiential learning opportunities were more attractive to potential employers. Faculty perceived that employers in the sport industry were more likely to hire candidates with practical experience, as it demonstrates a level of readiness and familiarity with the demands of the profession. Faculty perceived experiential learning opportunities in sport management programs as instrumental in equipping students with practical skills, providing real-world experience, and ultimately increasing students’ employability in the competitive sport industry.

### **Networking**

Internships provided students with valuable networking opportunities. Students engaging in experiential learning build relationships with industry professionals who can guide them in their career aspirations. Networking allowed students to collaborate and learn from others outside of their classroom education. Students gained invaluable

insight into current trends, best practices, and job opportunities by building relationships with site supervisors and colleagues. Connecting with industry experts could provide mentorship opportunities and open doors for future opportunities. Seven participants connected with students on LinkedIn to help the students grow their networks. “Abigail” mentioned:

I grew up in the area and I still have a lot of contacts. It’s been really helpful to have contacts.... But it’s like something that is a constant that I’m doing. I personally network. So, then my network can then become my students’ network.

“Margo” noted students can look at her LinkedIn account. If they see someone they are interested in meeting, “Margo” will make the introductions. Other participants discussed the value of LinkedIn. “Goldfish” said “Alums hire alums” and “Reggie” stated they “maintain a private LinkedIn page for students and alumni. Full-time and adjunct faculty place a priority on student relationships so we can advise on a personal level.” Eleven participants discussed having partnerships with local businesses, so students have places to complete the internship requirement and help the students expand their networks.

### ***Networking Builds Confidence***

A subtheme of networking was that internships and experiential learning opportunities build confidence. Students were expected to look for an internship suitable to them and their interests. Faculty and staff would help but ultimately it is the student’s responsibility to find an internship. The participants mentioned that looking for an internship is very much like seeking a job after graduation and they want students to have the skills and confidence to look for work, post-graduation. Some students looked to faculty to find them an internship stating that they do not have the same connections as the faculty member. This was all the more reason to have the student build their network, job-seeking skills, and confidence. On finding internships, participant “Alex” stated the students want to be told what to do:

That's part of the experience. It's kind of like getting a job. Go find a place to volunteer, and they are like yeah, I'm a junior tell me what to do and I give them 10 choices and the students say that's too many choices. Tell me where to go. I say I'm not going to hand walk you, so I narrow it down and send them to trusted places.

Internships helped the students build a sense of competence and confidence in their ability to complete the work needed and to develop skills such as communication, problem-solving, and technical skills. While gaining experience in the field of study, students were exposed to the industry's practices and expectations. This exposure built confidence in the students by giving them a better understanding of the industry and industry-specific knowledge. Successfully completing an internship, and receiving positive feedback builds confidence. Faculty members recognized the importance of networking in the sport industry. Experiential learning allowed students to connect with professionals, industry leaders, and organizations. Building a network during these opportunities was perceived as a valuable asset that could significantly contribute to future career prospects.

### **Resources Available to Faculty**

All the participants mentioned they would help the students find a suitable internship, but none indicated they would place a student in an internship. Students needed to choose an internship that they felt was a good fit for them. According to "Mary," "...many [students] find these experiences via networking with our alums and faculty contacts." "Bob" also mentioned something similar with, "Guidance is the point. Each student is responsible for their search and application, but we help students become aware of opportunities." Another participant, "Sue" stated, "Our students definitely get really solid internship experiences and we have many well-established sites and relationships." Faculty desired to provide better experiences and more opportunities for students. Support staff, offices on campus, and the university location were critical resources in providing experiential learning opportunities for students.

Two participants indicated they were the only person in their department available to assist students in finding internships which can make assisting students difficult. Seven participants mentioned having a career services person who will help students find internships and some of those people will assess the students' internships. "Meg A." mentioned that they "have a centralized co-op office who does a lot of the work." Six universities employed full-time faculty and/or staff that helped students find internships. In one instance, the participant said the career services department vetted the site, but the participant did the site visits and graded the students' internships. Another participant, "Planning" indicated they "have a dedicated internship and career manager in the School (sic) for this purpose." In two cases, the person interviewed was the only person in the department who taught classes and managed the internships. Only one participant, "Techie," mentioned having two full-time people whose job was to "get high profile off-campus internships."

Some participants had at least one other person who would help the students find an internship. That person was another colleague or a career service person. "Katy" talked about how students are required to locate their placements:

We offer a plethora of suggested options that can help them get the ball rolling. All placements must be approved by our Director of Experiential Learning and Outreach; the person in that role is the one managing/teaching all experiential learning courses.

In the end, most of the participants were the faculty members who visited the internship sites, assessed the students, and managed any issues that arose.

### **Discussion**

Sport management education is evolving beyond the confines of traditional classroom lecture instruction. The only accrediting body for sport management, COSMA, incorporates experiential learning into its curricular requirements (Principle 3.2, Common Professional Component) and in Principle 7.3 Business and Industry Linkages/Internship

(COSMA, 2024). COSMA's *Accreditation Process and Self-Study Preparation Manual* states, "Students benefit from applied experiences and connections made in the professional setting while employers have the opportunity to guide and evaluate students" (COSMA, 2024, p. 57). Recognizing the need to bridge the gap between theory and practice, academic institutions have increasingly incorporated experiential learning opportunities into their programs (Guidotti et al., 2023; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; DeLuca & Fornatora, 2020; Pierson & Troppe, 2010). Internships and experiential learning opportunities have emerged as a pivotal mechanism to expose students to the intricacies of the sport industry, providing a platform for them to apply theoretical concepts in real-world scenarios (Dees & Hall, 2012). This study explores the experiential learning opportunities afforded to students in various sport management programs, the faculty perceptions of the benefits of experiential learning opportunities provided through their sport management programs, and the resources available to faculty when assisting students with experiential learning opportunities.

RQ1 comprises the experiential learning opportunities afforded to students in sport management programs. Participants mentioned internships as an immersive experience in the real-world application of sport management principles. Internships are where students work off campus at sport organizations over a summer or semester. These opportunities provide students with hands-on exposure to the dynamics of sport organizations where they hone their skills in game operations, event management, and marketing to name a few (Brown et al., 2018; Cohen & Nite, 2019; Jones et al., 2008). Another area of opportunity for internships includes the athletic facilities on campus which serve as vibrant hubs for experiential learning. Working for on-campus athletics can give students firsthand knowledge of how collegiate athletics is managed and may be beneficial for students. Beyond campus-centric experiences, some participants spoke of extending their programs into the local community. Collaborations with the YMCA, youth sports teams, and other sports organizations present students with a chance to apply their knowledge in the community context. This

linkage with grassroots initiatives contributes to the development of socially conscious sport managers who understand the broader impact of their decisions.

Aside from the internship experiences of working for local sport teams, on-campus athletic facilities, or community organizations, five participants have opportunities for students to participate in short-term, high-profile events such as Super Bowl games, March Madness, MLB All-Star games, and conference championships which allow students to witness and actively participate in the intricate preparation and execution of major sport spectacles. These direct engagements foster a practical understanding of the complexities involved in managing large-scale events. Participation in external events such as conference championships, marathons, and PGA events adds another layer to the experiential learning landscape. These occasions not only expose students to diverse sporting environments but also offer insights into management intricacies associated with different types of sports. Navigating the logistical challenges of diverse events enriches students' problem-solving abilities and adaptability. Visits to stadiums and facilities further deepen students' understanding of the sport management industry (Askren & James, 2021). By directly observing the behind-the-scenes operations, students gain insights into facility management, logistics, and the nuances of maintaining world-class sporting venues. This holistic approach ensures that students are well-versed in the practical aspects of the sport management field (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Dewey, 1938; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Wanless et al., 2016).

Other experiential learning opportunities may occur within the classroom. Seven participants embed experiential learning opportunities within the course curriculum to enhance the theories being taught and boost practical skills needed for employment. Faculty who embed experiential learning opportunities into the curriculum have seen students' skills develop while combining the immersion of practical application with classroom theory (Birmingham et al., 2021; DeLuca & Fornatora, 2020; McKelvey & Southall, 2008; Wanless et al., 2016).

RQ2 involves the faculty's perceptions of the benefits of experiential learning opportunities

provided through the participants' sport management programs. Faculty perceptions of the benefits of experiential learning opportunities in sport management programs are multifaceted and underscore the recognition of the substantial impact internships and experiential learning opportunities have on students' academic and professional development. Key themes from faculty perspectives shed light on the advantages of experiential learning. These themes include practical experience which enhances skills, job prospects, and networking opportunities.

Faculty members view experiential learning as a bridge between theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom and its practical application in real-world settings. Students can use the knowledge they learn in the classroom to enhance their learning experiences (Cohen & Nite, 2019; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; DeLuca & Fornatora, 2020; Wanless et al., 2016). The hands-on events and community collaborations allow students to navigate the complexities of the sport industry. Faculty appreciate the transformative power of practical experience, emphasizing its role in deepening students' understanding of industry dynamics and preparing them for the demands of the professional realm.

Faculty consistently recognize experiential learning as a powerful vehicle for enhancing students' skill sets. Through active engagement in real-world scenarios, students acquire practical skills that are directly applicable to the sport management industry. Students become more confident in their abilities to ask questions, listen, and learn which shapes their interpersonal skills (Wanless et al., 2016). Faculty perceive that experiential learning refines students' abilities in critical areas such as management, problem-solving, decision-making, and communication, thereby preparing them for the dynamic challenges they will encounter in their future careers. Students learn how to approach people and work with others, which enhances their engagement skills (Cunningham et al., 2005; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkov, 2016).

Another perception among faculty is the significant impact of experiential learning on students' employability. Faculty members recognize the sport

industry places a premium on practical experience, and students actively engaged in experiential learning are deemed more competitive in the job market. Faculty perceive that graduates with a robust experiential learning background are better positioned to secure desirable positions and navigate their career paths successfully (Lu & Kuo, 2016; Ord & Leather, 2011). The perceptions include students needing these experiences to garner employment post-graduation. Students who have multiple experiential learning opportunities propel themselves to the top of the candidate list in the application process. Participants mentioned students with experiential learning internships will separate themselves from the rest of the people vying for jobs. The students become the top contenders for employment. Experiential learning opportunities have a positive influence on employability post-graduation (King, 2009; Schneider & Stier, 2006).

The importance of networking is widely acknowledged by faculty members. Engaging with industry professionals during internships, events, and community initiatives provides students with opportunities to establish meaningful connections (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Schneider & Stier, 2006). When students take on various experiential learning opportunities during their college career, they gain multiple instances to grow their network and showcase their skills for future job possibilities. Building networks is important for all students, especially after graduation. Completing experiential learning opportunities can be incredibly beneficial for students as they gain practical and decision-making skills and build confidence in their abilities (Cohen & Nite, 2019; Pierce et al., 2011). Faculty perceive that these networking opportunities not only expose students to diverse career paths within the sport industry but also facilitate access to mentors, industry insights, and potential job opportunities.

To answer RQ3, participants reveal the resources available to faculty when assisting students with experiential learning opportunities. On a positive note, many departments leverage the services provided by the career service department to assist students in finding suitable internships. Career service departments often have established networks with

industry partners, maintain internship databases, and offer guidance on resume building and interview preparation. Faculty may collaborate with career services professionals to connect students with relevant experiential learning opportunities tailored to their academic and career interests (Bermingham et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2018; Kelley, 2004).

Departments enhance their support infrastructure by embedding dedicated staff members who specialize in experiential learning within the department itself. These support staff play a pivotal role in facilitating connections between students and potential internship providers, coordinating logistics, and ensuring that students have access to a diverse range of experiential learning opportunities. Their presence within the department streamlines matching students with appropriate placements.

Faculty members integrate experiential learning directly into their courses, creating a seamless connection between academic content and practical application (Wanless et al., 2016). This approach allows students to gain hands-on experience while fulfilling course requirements. Faculty design coursework that encourages students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world settings, fostering a deeper understanding of sport management principles and practices.

Faculty take an active role in facilitating experiential learning by accompanying students to various events and venues. These faculty-led experiences may include attending high-profile sports events like Super Bowls and conference championships, organizing sport facility visits, and exploring local venues relevant to the university's location. Faculty involvement in these experiences not only provides students with valuable insights but also allows for mentorship and guidance as they navigate the complexities of the sport industry (Askren & James, 2021).

Other faculty mentioned they are strained to give students the opportunities needed due to various concerns. The effective facilitation of experiential learning opportunities for students in sport management programs is contingent on the availability of resources. In some cases, certain limitations and challenges exist, creating obstacles for

faculty members aiming to support students in their pursuit of internships. There are areas where resources are lacking, particularly focusing on the influence of location and the absence of dedicated personnel managing internship logistics.

While location can be considered a resource, it can also pose challenges depending on the geographical context of the educational institution. Programs situated in remote or less central areas may face disadvantages in providing students with diverse and easily accessible internship opportunities. The lack of a vibrant sports industry presence in the vicinity may limit the range of experiences available to students, impacting their exposure to different facets of sport management. Consequently, faculty in such locations may encounter difficulties in broadening the scope of experiential learning opportunities for their students.

One of the critical challenges faced by faculty members is the lack of dedicated personnel to manage student internship logistics, further exacerbating the challenges associated with limited resources. In situations where participants are the sole individuals responsible for coordinating internships, the workload may become overwhelming. This constraint could impede the program's ability to establish and maintain strong connections with industry partners, hindering efforts to secure a variety of internship options for students. The absence of a dedicated team may result in a lack of specialization and expertise in navigating the complexities of the sport industry (Sattler, 2018). Additionally, the deficiency of dedicated personnel may limit the program's capacity to provide individualized support, mentorship, and career guidance to students throughout their internship experiences. The scarcity of support may hinder the program's ability to stay abreast of industry trends, establish comprehensive networks, and provide students with a well-rounded understanding of the sport management field. A deficiency of resources, particularly in terms of location and personnel, may directly impact the quality and diversity of internship opportunities available to students. Faculty members facing these resource-related challenges may struggle to provide students with access to a broad spectrum of sport industry experiences.

Overall, experiential learning was seen as a necessary and important piece of the sport management curriculum. The types of experiential learning opportunities provided by sport management programs varied from short-term experiences to fully immersive internships that lasted a summer or term. All of these experiences were critical to students gaining valuable skills and a vast network for future jobs and career growth. Finally, the various resources available—or not available—to faculty can help or hinder their ability to provide the necessary experiences, skills, and guidance to sport management students.

### Limitations and Future Research

While this study has some interesting findings, one limitation is that the sample size is small and the results cannot be generalized to all sport management programs. Although a variety of institution sizes, types, and program sizes were featured, a larger sample population would be able to provide additional insight into how sport management programs manage internships and experiential learning at their respective institutions. A limitation of using the online questionnaire is the inability to solicit additional information, rich detail, or feedback from the participants. Finally, a limitation of recruiting via listservs could result in not reaching participants who meet the criteria for participation in a specific study.

Experiential learning is an important aspect of a sport management student's schooling, and the sport industry heavily relies on students leaving their respective programs with experience and knowledge of how the industry functions. While it is imperative to understand the types of experiential learning opportunities provided by institutions, it is just as important to understand the students' experience navigating their options through their institutions and experiences in an internship or experiential learning opportunity. This study shows that more research is needed to get a better picture of the state of experiential learning within sport management. In addition, there is no standardization for internships, experiential learning opportunities, practica, or service-learning standards in sport management, though COSMA sets forth best practices for internship

design and content and supports the inclusion of experiential learning throughout a students' tenure in a degree program. Future research into the standardization of experiential learning, sport organization site supervisors' views on internships and student preparedness as well as the students' view of the experience can add to the literature and help shape sport management programs for the next several years.

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