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Employability Skills a Case Study on a Business-Oriented Sport Management Program

Margaret C. Keiper *

University of Alaska – Fairbanks, School of Management

PO Box 756080

Fairbanks, AK 99775, USA

(907) 474 – 5905

mkeiper@alaska.edu

*Corresponding Author

Jennifer Sieszputowski

Central Michigan University, USA

Troy Morgan

Metropolitan State University of Denver, USA

Marcia J. Mackey

Central Michigan University, USA

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify employability skills needed by students to be embedded into sport management curriculum. Focus group, qualitative, methodology was used. Three focus groups with a total of 11 (n=11) participants revealed skills and knowledge employers desired in graduates of sport management programs. Analysis of the data revealed four major categories of skills that employers desired: personal skills, technical skills, job search skills, and foundational knowledge. The skill of the moderator, transcription of the data, and individual focus group participants dominating the discussion were all common limitations to this study based on the focus group methodology used. Educators in business programs can use this methodology to identify transferable skills that can be embedded into their curriculum. Minimal literature exists on the practical application on how to align sport management curriculum and education with industry needs and expectations.

Key words: *Employability; curriculum; transferable skill; industry involvement; integration.*

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Introduction

The academic field of sport management formally dates back to the mid-1980s when the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) was founded (Costa, 2005). Sport management, as an academic discipline, no matter where the program is housed at a university has a core, business-oriented curriculum. Employability, job placement, and career preparedness have all remained important topics of discussion surrounding sport management education. It is generally accepted and understood that within the sport management field competition for quality internships is commonplace (Williams, 2004), and the competition for employment does not end after internships. Landing a full-time job in the sport management field upon graduation from an undergraduate or graduate program can be highly competitive. Consequently, academicians in sport management must ensure that sport programs prepare students with the skills and knowledge needed to meet industry expectations for new hires (Mathner & Martin, 2012). Meeting industry expectations is critical as it has a major impact on employers in sport organizations as program graduates become employees (Petersen & Pierce, 2009).

Although sport management programs commonly identify a need and desire to prepare their students for employability, there continues to be disconnect between sport management educational preparation and sport industry employability (de Schepper & Sotiriadou, 2018; Dinning, 2017; Griffiths, Bullough, Shibli, & Wilson, 2017; Tsitskari, Goudas, Tsalouchou, & Michalopoulou, 2017; Minten & Forsyth, 2014; Gursoy, Rahman, & Swanger, 2012; Minten, 2010; Eagleman & McNary, 2010). The importance of this topic is that employability is one of the most desirable outcomes of sport management education (Tsitskari et al., 2017).

Minimal literature exists on the practical application on *how* to align sport management curriculum and education with industry needs and expectations. The Commission on Sport Management Education (COSMA), the specialized accreditation body for sport management education, suggests that programs should periodically survey employers to identify if graduates and degree programs are meeting the needs of the employers ("COSMA Accreditation Principles and Self-Study Preparation", n.d.). However, as of 2018, there were only 55 sport management programs with COSMA accreditation ("Accredited Programs", 2018). Fifty-five programs represent less than 14% of all undergraduate, sport management programs in the United States. Also, the 14% that are COSMA accredited are not *required* to survey employers, but rather it is merely a suggestion. This raises the question: how can sport management programs identify the needs of employers to ensure students are employable? The purpose of this study was to identify the employability skills employers need from sport management graduates. This article is useful to sport management academicians to give an easy to follow means of engaging sport management employers into their programs and embed employability skills into their programs. This study was guided by the following research questions:

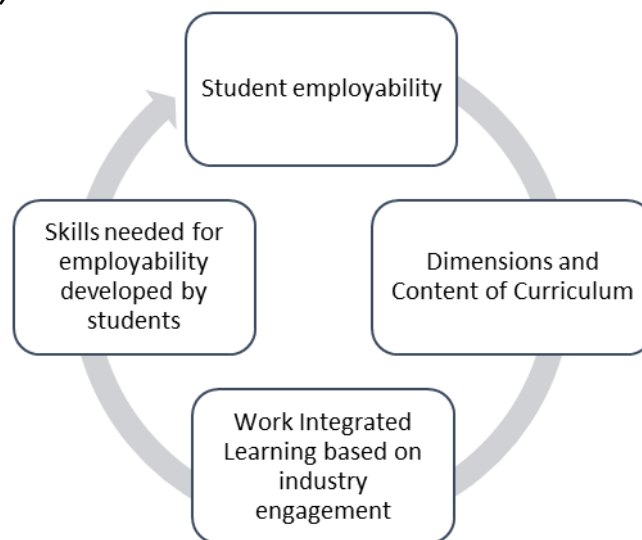
- 1) What skills and foundational knowledge should seniors have when exiting a sport management program?
- 2) What are the expectations employers have from graduates of a sport management program?

Literature Review

Many new graduates are underemployed or find it difficult to obtain work in the sectors in which they are educated and interested (Helyer & Lee, 2014). However, embedding employability into a curriculum is very complex, and no single prescription of employability exists because of this complexity (Yorke & Knight, 2006). There is not one single employability framework that is coherent, systematic, detailed, comprehensive, and specific (Jollands, 2011). Also, many theories and models in

regard to employability are extremely elaborate and can't be practically applied (Pool & Sewell, 2007). One of the reasons it is difficult to develop a theory on employability is that it is often not clearly defined. Also, employability requirements can vary from discipline to discipline. For example, what works in engineering might not fit for sport management. For the purpose of this study, employability is defined as the possession of core skills that employers specify as necessary to successfully contribute to a sport management job. Skill is defined as the ability to do something well. Thus, sport management employability skills is defined as the attributes and knowledge needed to gain employment and successfully contribute to the sport management field. Figure 1 depicts the cycle of employability.

Figure 1:
Cycle of Employability



Industry Engagement

Employability through industry engagement is not a new concept. Common methodologies for industry engagement in sport management include advisory boards, councils, and/or committees who provide guidance to an overall program on what is important for organizations hiring recent graduates (Refae, Askari, & Alnaji, 2016). Industry engagement also comes in the form of internships, which are recognized as one of the most important aspects of sport management education and are required by the majority of sport management programs (Kelley, 2004; Eagle & McNary, 2010). Therefore, internships are an integral piece to student preparation for the industry. Despite advisory boards and internships being extremely beneficial, they alone are not sufficient to ensure students gain the skills needed in the industry. Advisory board engagement is often not fully shared within a department, while internship quality varies greatly from one intern placement to the next. In a 2011 study involving 493 business faculty members, it was found that 70% of faculty from the study had no direct involvement with their advisory board (Kilcrease, 2011). Also noteworthy is that within Kilcrease's 2011 study, it was found that most faculty from the study received no information on their board's activities (Kilcrease, 2011). In reference to internships, students often have less positive attitudes toward professions in sport management after completing an internship (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, & Kent, 2005). Quality and organization are reasons students may not have a positive experience with an internship (Agoston, Marinas, & Igrat, 2017). Thus, sport management programs need to consider further employer engagement to build on student employability.

Employability

The importance of the concept of employability in higher education has risen significantly over time (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Employability skills have been defined, by many researchers, as skills that are directly pertinent to obtaining and maintain work (Bridgestock, 2009; Harvey, 2001; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). Moreover, significant research has been conducted in regard to employability of college graduates. Some studies are industry specific, such as a 2006 study that considers the employability skills needed in engineering (Markes, 2006). Others are more comprehensive reviews of literature on employability exist such as Artess, Bourne, and Hooley (2017) whom compiled a comprehensive review of literature on employability from 2012-2016. Other studies focus on defining employability (Lees, 2002).

One of the most important factors of employability involves individual skills. Discipline-specific knowledge, formal academic training, and job experience are a few aspects of employability skills. Other individual skills that influence employability are basic social skills such as reliability, personal competencies such as confidence, transferable skills such as time management, and high-level transferable skills such as teamwork (McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005). In sport management academic programs, skills are developed through coursework. Undergraduate sport management programs generally consist of a variation of the following courses: Introduction to sport management, sport law, internships and/or practicums, sport marketing, sport facilities and event management, sport organizational behavior, sport finance, and sport sociology (Eaglemen & McNary, 2010). However, the need for graduate employability continues to become an issue because there are often mismatches between acquired skills from a university and the required skills by employers.

Employability in Sport Management

Employability has only been considered in sport management research on a couple of occasions. In a 2017 study of sport and recreation employers in Greece, researchers administered the Survey of Employability Skills Needed in the Workforce (SESNW) to test the applicability of the measure within the sport and recreation field. Results of the 2017 study indicated the responses gathered from the Greek sports employers did not adequately support the dimensionality of the original scale (Tsitaskari et al., 2017). Similarly, United Kingdom researchers investigated sport industry employability by implementing a focused work-based project and enlisting the perspectives of the employer (Dinning, 2017). This study adapted Gibb's (2002) "list of enterprising behaviors, skills and attributes, and Yorke & Knight's (2006) employability skills" (p. 6). Results indicated a significant difference in how students viewed themselves on the adapted skills list and how their managers viewed them in relation to the adapted skills list. Dinning (2017) states "With the exception of verbal communication, the findings identify a mismatch between the students' and project host perceptions of how the skills were or should have been applied in the context of their project" (p. 7). Both of these studies support a need for practical methods that can be implemented into undergraduate sport management programs to identify employer needs and the knowledge and skills they want graduates to possess.

Moreover, possession of only one industry segment specific skill set is not sufficient as there is a need to enhance skills that are useful across the many sport industry segments (Sleep & Read, 2006; Minten & Forsyth, 2014). To this end, sport management programs must be in lockstep with industry professionals to continuously prepare future professionals with the skills necessary to contribute to the workforce upon graduation.

Method

To identify the needs and skills employers want from undergraduate sport management program graduates, the researchers utilized focus group interviews. To be eligible for inclusion in the investigation, focus group members had to be employed full-time in the sports industry and located in the state of Michigan. The sample was fifteen (n=15) sport management professionals who were divided up into three groups based on physical location in the state. The researchers' goal when selecting focus group participants was to include a diverse sample of professionals to represent the extremely complex nature of the sport management field (Crosett & Hums, 2011). The researchers considered the segment of the sports industry and the job position level, as well as the career focus area of the participants. The selected participants represented professional, collegiate, interscholastic, amateur, Olympic, and recreational sports and career areas of event management, sponsorship, communications, sporting goods, ticket sales, facility management, media relations, marketing, and administration/executives. The participants also represented all job levels from entry level to executive level. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the participants in the study.

The study utilized focus group methodology as a means to elicit insightful information. Focus group research allows the participants to develop a sense of group cohesion (Peters, 1993). Trust between members of the group allows for deeper dialogue and results in rich data (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). It also provides an industrious method of obtaining information from multiple resources in a single controlled setting (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This approach enabled the researchers to create an environment that allowed the sport industry professionals to engage fully with one another and present honestly their opinions. Three separate focus groups were conducted with each group consisting of 3 to 4 participants from diverse sports industry backgrounds. Participants were asked eight predetermined questions about sport management education curriculum, employability, skill gaps, and needs. Two trained researchers attended each focus group meeting, took notes, and recorded each discussion.

Table 1:
Demographics of Focus Group Participants

Characteristic	Frequency
Gender	
Male	6 (54.55%)
Female	5 (45.45%)
Age	
20 – 29	2 (18.18%)
30 – 39	4 (36.36%)
40 – 49	3 (27.27%)
50 – 59	2 (18.18%)
<i>Average Age</i>	39.64
Years in Industry Full-Time	
1 – 5 years	1 (9.09%)
6- 10 years	2 (18.18%)
11 – 15 years	2(18.18%)
16 – 20 years	4 (36.36%)
21 – 25 years	1 (9.09%)
25 – 30 years	1 (9.09%)
<i>Average Years in Industry</i>	14.73
Industry Segment	
College	3 (27.27%)
Professional	2 (18.18%)
Youth/Amateur	3 (27.27%)
Tourism & Other	3 (27.27%)

After the focus group interviews were conducted, data was transcribed, and researchers used an inductive approach to identify categories (Merriam, 2014). The researchers identified, ordered, and coded similar words, phrases, and content relevant to the research questions utilizing Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. If responses from two or more focus groups were similar in nature, the commonalities that emerged were used to construct categories. Member-checks were used to ensure trustworthiness of interpretations and conclusion.

Results

Analysis of the data revealed four major categories of skills that employers desired: personal skills, technical skills, job search skills, and foundational knowledge. The identification of the themes, or categories, was done by identifying the expression of a common single idea. The categories, as commonly accepted in qualitative analysis of content, were developed from a combination of employability theory and previous studies on employability (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Personal skills. Personal skills were the most frequently mentioned skills among the participants, and all three focus groups emphasized the importance of graduates needing people and teamwork skills. Other personal skills identified as important were: having confidence, being coachable, taking initiative, having a strong work ethic, being punctual, and possessing problem-solving skills. One participant stressed that graduates wanting to work in the sport industry need to be “wired for the lifestyle,” which included working long hours and weekends. Another participant emphasized employees need to be “willing to get their hands dirty.”

Technical skills. The most commonly emphasized technical skills were: written and verbal communication skills, technology skills including Microsoft Excel and Adobe software, and research skills. One participant explained that research skills are needed so when employees are given a project or problem, they can solve it independently and without being micro-managed.

Job search skills. The participants voiced concerns about skill deficits they have observed related to sport management graduates applying for jobs. They explained many graduates are not well versed in job search skills, including having a personal career plan with goals, writing professional resumes, and possessing effective interviewing skills. Multiple participants explained how important resumes and interviews are because the participants use those sources to judge a candidate's level of competency. Multiple participants mentioned job seekers needed to highlight more effectively their qualifications and their competencies related to the position on their resumes. Participants shared organizations prior to interviewing, and others mentioned the need for applicants to show they have knowledge about the specific position for which they applied and to dress professionally. Participants noted they would like to see more confidence displayed during interviews through eye contact, handshakes, and direct answers.

Foundational knowledge. The knowledge areas graduates needed were: sales, marketing, project management, budgeting, accounting, human resources, and writing. The participants in this study explained graduates needed to write effectively in different formats, from composing tactful emails to creating business plans and applying for grants. In the area of human resources, one participant described how important it was to know how to work with people and through people.

Discussion

The study investigated the skills needed by employers from undergraduate sport management students. Findings indicated that employability is made up of a variety of skills and attributes, which is in line with other employability research. Basic social skills, personality attributes, verbal skills, and basic interpersonal skills were all considered to be critical to students getting jobs in the sports industry. Similarly, students are expected to have general occupational-specific knowledge and skills that are disciplinary-specific to sport management.

The methodology used in this study can serve as a practical framework in which sport management and other business-based programs can utilize to identify potential gaps within their own curriculum in regard to preparing students with employability skills. The critical element to the practical use of this application methodology is that the findings are then shared with faculty within the department, and curricular changes if needed, are made in a timely manner.

Future research considerations into the employability skills for graduates is not limited to the current method nor is it limited to only sport management students. While the benefits of a focus group methodology were previously articulated, future studies utilizing different methods will contribute to the applied field. For instance, a mixed methods longitudinal approach could provide context as well as trends of desired and required employability skills over time. Also, replicating the Tsitaskari et al. (2017) study by adopting the Survey of Employability Skills Needed in the Workforce (SESNW) could also be meaningful. Lastly, in uncovering how sport management academic programs (organizations) impact the social processes of gaining employment of their graduates, Cassell and Symon (2004) suggest a case study method can reflect how different aspects of the organization may impact these processes. As such, a case study

would be appropriate in helping to uncover how academic programs (organizations) impact the social processes of gaining employment in the sport management industry.

The themes that emerged from this study emphasize the importance of understanding the complexities of employability in sport management education and the need to regularly engage employers. This study is significant, as very little research exists that offers a practical application to engaging employers from the sports industry into academic programs beyond review boards and internships. This focus group reminds us, that though themes such as work experience are extremely important in sport management education, students need to develop a variety of skills for employability. Through a more thorough understanding of employer needs, sport management programs can integrate students' employability skills into their curriculum.

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