



# The Internship in Sport Management: A Literature Review



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### Abstract

Internships are a pivotal component of sport management education, providing students with practical experience and often influencing career trajectories. However, evidence suggests students may be underprepared by sport management curricula for the rigors and realities of internships. This literature review synthesizes research on sport management internships, highlighting their role, perceived value, and student experiences. The preparation offered to students by sport management programs is examined, with findings indicating possible gaps between classroom learning and industry needs. Skills like communication, technology, and business acumen are often lacking compared to employer expectations. Supplemental experiences like job shadowing and volunteer work may help better equip students. The review identifies issues of privilege, harassment, and dissatisfaction that can diminish internship effectiveness. sport management programs must reevaluate curricula and experiential learning to ensure students receive adequate preparation and support. With internships influencing pursuit of sports careers, programs must optimize this pivotal experience. The review concludes by proposing further research into equity, harassment, and the impact of COVID-19 on internship efficacy.

Keywords: Internships, experiential learning, curriculum, industry experience

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### 1. Background

Due to the growth of the sports industry into a multi-billion-dollar industry and the countless number of students in sport management academic programs, the sports industry has transformed into a highly competitive job market, particularly for new graduates (Gillentine et al., 2014; Sattler & Achen, 2021). Jobs in the sports industry are in such high demand that they are often called "dream jobs" by those inside and outside the field (Gitlin, 2015). While jobs in sports are available nationwide, there are undoubtedly a finite number of roles in both each specific area of the sports industry, such as marketing, finance, or event management, and at each individual level of sport, including professional sports, college athletics, and recreational sports (Gillentine et al., 2014; Gitlin, 2015). For example, there are just 32 NFL teams, each with a limited number of jobs in each functional area; a single NFL team may have just a handful of jobs in an area such as marketing, and each may only open once every few years. The strong draw of the excitement of working in the industry and the limited number of roles has created a market that is almost impossible to break into with experience (Gitlin, 2015). As a result, the sport management academic field has moved toward experiential learning to better prepare students for entry-level roles (Moorman, 2004); A key piece of experiential learning in the sport management industry is the internship.

No single step in the sport management career path is as valuable as the internship (Brown et al., 2018). However, a student that is dissatisfied with the internship experience may be less likely to pursue a full-time position in the industry after graduation, settling for jobs in a less competitive industry (Koo et al., 2016). Conversely, a successful internship can serve as a launching point for a career

in the sports industry (Moorman, 2004). Perhaps there is no better example of this than the esteemed former athletic director of the University of Florida, Jeremy Foley, who rose from an intern in the athletic department to being considered the "best athletic director in the business" (Newell, 2008). While multiple studies have focused on student satisfaction in internships and experiential learning and the internship experience, aside from Deluca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016), few have focused solely on the preparation offered to students by sport management programs (Chinomano & Surujal, 2012; Koo et al., 2016). A new wave of studies, including Walker et al. (2021) and Hardin et al. (2021), have explored the student experience of the sport management internship, including negative aspects.

In its ideal form, the internship experience in sport management provides three key benefits: the opportunity to practice skills and apply theoretical concepts to real-world issues, a chance to problem solve and think critically beyond classroom or textbook examples, and an occasion to learn the values and norms of sports organizations (Sattler & Achen, 2021). The first benefit Sattler and Achen (2021) mentioned is an opportunity to practice on-the-job skills, which shows its importance and gives some insight into why internships have become commonplace in the industry. However, there is evidence to suggest that sport management students may lack the skills needed to thrive in internships (Sattler & Achen, 2021). DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) attributed this gap in preparation to issues with various sport management curriculums. That study examined the courses offered by a single program and their impact on internship preparedness. DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove are supported, in part, by King (2009) who presented a Turnkey Sports Poll of industry executives that found industry employers were more likely to hire a candidate with a business degree than a candidate with a degree in sport management.

### 2. Link to Academic Theory

Christen et al. (2006), used agency theory better to understand job performance as an influence on job satisfaction. An agency relationship is where one party acts on behalf of another (Shapiro, 2005). Agency theory is based on fixed compensation for performing a task (Christen et al., 2006). While many internships in sport management are unpaid, which may be problematic in itself, students are still receiving some benefit for the work in the form of course credit (Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011). Christen et al. (2006) analyzed secondary data of a survey of over 200 United States supermarkets. The survey measured factors such as store performance, job performance, and job satisfaction. The researchers used factor analysis to standardize the survey, which was based on multiple five-, six-, and seven-point Likert scales. Data was analyzed using an estimation approach through a triangular system of four simultaneous questions with four endogenous variables, ten exogenous variables, and several store and manager characteristics. The study found that job performance has a strong positive effect on satisfaction. That is to say, that if a subject felt he was good at his job, he was likely to be more satisfied with his position. This positive effect appears at odds with standard agency theory. However, this may be explained by agency theory being rooted in economics and lacking literature in sociology and the social sciences (Shapiro, 2005). This study will lean heavily on the results of Christen et al. (2006) and the findings that job performance does impact job satisfaction.

#### 3. Literature Review

While internships are broadly accepted as a part of the sport management educational experience, practitioners have stated that students in sport management do not get enough practical experience outside of coursework prior to entering the field (Sattler & Achen, 2021). There is also evidence that a lack of preparation can cause the internship experience to be ineffective (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016). Numerous researchers have suggested that sport management students need preinternship experiences to expose students to industry norms prior to the student's first or only, formal internship (Sattler & Achen, 2021). Foster and Dollar (2017) suggested that students should be exposed to a practicum, job shadowing, or required volunteer experience before the culminating internship to acclimate to the industry before the internship work experience. Others, including Mathner and Martin (2012), have recommended that programs adjust curriculums to teach the skills that practitioners are seeking in students, such as technology and communication.

If sport organizations are, in fact, hiring business graduates at a higher rate than sport management graduates as King (2009) suggests, sport management programs, their professors, and students in sport management, both current and potential, must ask why that is occurring. An additional consideration for potential students is that a general business degree may give graduates more flexible job opportunities than a focused and niche degree in sport management (Maryville University, 2021). If current students are truly unprepared for even entry-level internships in their chosen field of sport management, future students may opt for the more flexible degree options. Likewise, suppose sport organizations are more likely to hire graduates from general business programs than from sport management. In that case, students may ask themselves why they would limit or "pigeonhole" themselves

when choosing an undergraduate major. Sport management programs must be concerned with this because those programs only exist if enough students want to join them. To maintain enrollment, programs must adequately prepare students for work in the industry and place them in industry roles upon graduation (Moorman, 2004). Regardless of degree choice factors between sport management and other fields, if sport management students are ill-prepared for internships, as DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) suggest, or dissatisfied with the internship, as Koo et al. (2016) suggest, at a particular program, students may be more likely to choose a sport management program at another institution where students succeed in high level internships.

### 4. Purpose and Methods

The purpose of this paper is to examine and disseminate existing literature regarding the sport management internship and to identify gaps within it. Future research opportunities will also be highlighted.

Using online library resources, articles discussing internships in sport management were searched for. An emphasis was placed on articles dealing directly with the student experience in internships and preparation tied to curriculum. Four articles touched on internships in sport management in general terms. Two discussed the student experience. Seven articles focused on the value of internships in the field of sport management. Four addressed academic preparation and curriculum related to the internship.

#### 5. Results and Conclusions

The analysis of the reviewed articles is presented in the following section. First, the overall literature concepts are discussed. Articles are divided into topics including internships in sport management, the student perception of internships, and academic preparation for internships. This review leads to suggestions for future research.

The internship in sport management is often considered the culminating experience of academic progress and the link between education and a student's career (Sattler & Achen, 2021). Internships are regarded as a key component of experiential learning, a style of learning best suited for highly competitive and rapidly changing industries (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016). Both experiential learning and internship requirements are crucial parts of the sport management curriculum. Approximately 75% of sport management programs require some type of internship, and COMSA(The Commission Sport Management Accreditation) refers to the internship as an integrative experience that programs should include (Sattler & Achen, 2021). A sport management internship may influence a student's desire to pursue a full-time position in the field and may prepare a student for such positions (Surujlal & Singh, 2010; Koo et al., 2016). However, students may perceive a lack of preparation that inhibits their success in internships (DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016).

### 6. Internships in the Academic Field of Sport Management

As the sports industry has exploded finically, employment opportunities within it have grown in both volume and importance (King, 2009). As a result, the need for training of qualified professionals to fill those roles has received significant attention. Universities have quickly tried to develop sport management programs at the graduate and undergraduate levels to fill the need for such training. Sport management programs may be separate academic units or housed in education, recreation and physical education, or business departments. This fragmentation, combined with the accelerated growth

of the academic field, caused programs to adopt varied curricula. While accreditation programs, such as COSMA, have attempted to make programs more uniform, sport management programs still differ greatly between institutions. Despite differences in programs, the one constant in the field of sport management seems to be internships, with over 75% of sport management programs requiring some type of internship to graduate (Sattler & Achen, 2021). There are multiple definitions of internships but in sport management, an internship is regarded as the process during which sport management students work as trainees to gain practical experience in career-relevant work in a sports organization (Surujlal & Singh, 2010). Higher education institutions have historically faced challenges in deliver the best possible education experience for students while properly preparing students for the workplace. As a result, many modified their approach to include experiential learning elements such as field-based coursework, internships, guest speakers, and site visits. The best interns will seek not only prestigious internships, but substantive ones (Moorman, 2004).

Three main stakeholder groups are part of the sport management internship: the student, the sport management program, and the host organization, including the on-site supervisor (Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011). A sport management program may hire or designate a staff member as the internship coordinator, with duties including approving student internship sites, liaising with on-site supervise, and overseeing documentation and other required academic work that a student may be required to submit (Moorman, 2004). Most programs refer internship agreements, signed by the coordinator, student, and on-site supervisor, that outline the position and its duties. Many sport management programs require internships to be over 400 hours of

work for a semester, but few internship sites pay for work that counts toward academic credit (Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011). Unpaid internships are legal in the United States provided that there is no guarantee of employment at the end of them, an intern does displace a regular employee position, and the training offered is hands on and industry related, per the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 (FLSA) (Moorman, 2004). Although this model has faced mounting pressure, it remains legal and commonplace (Schoepfer & Dodds, 2011).

### 7. The Student Experience

A newer wave of literature has examined the student perspective of the internship. These studies have tackled tough topics including privilege and sexual harassment. In line with the advancing relevance of social justice in American society, these timely, modern studies have brought up complex issues that sport management programs should consider moving forward.

Walker et al. (2021) examined internships in the context of sports hegemony. Describing interns as second-class citizens in roles that receive few learning opportunities, Walker et al. (2021) key on the institution privilege and the conclusion that unpaid internships benefit students of socioeconomic backgrounds commonly associated with privilege. The results of the qualitative study with 17 participants showed that students feel that internships in other fields appear lucrative but in sports internships are unfair. The study found that students accept unpaid internships as an institutionalized, unopposed norm in the industry.

Further examining negative aspects of the student internship experience, Hardin et al. (2021) studied sexual harassment of female students in an internship setting. 190 female students identifying as female were surveyed about their internships at youth, college, and professional sport levels. 66% of respondents reported experiencing some type of sexual harassment in their sport management internship. The study also found that, unsurprisingly, those that experienced harassment rated their overall internship experience lower.

### 8. Perceived Value of Internships for Students

While students generally do not receive money for an internship in sport management, students receive an opportunity to exercise their knowledge of sport management curriculum and theory in a real-life setting (Koo et al., 2016). Internships in sport management provide three key benefits: the opportunity to practice skills and apply theoretical concepts to real-world issues, a chance to problem solve and think critically beyond classroom or textbook examples, and an occasion to learn the values and norms of sports organizations (Sattler & Achen, 2021). The internship is considered by COSMA to be a key piece of career planning for students. The value of internships in the industry has been well documented in both business and academic journals (Moorman, 2004). A successful internship could lead students to pursue full-time roles in sport management and could provide professional preparation to a student (Surujlal and Singh 2010; Koo et al., 2016).

Koo et al. (2016) attempted to fill a gap in understanding of the effects of internship satisfaction impact the pursuit of full time in employment in sport management. The purpose of the study was to not only measure student interns' level of satisfaction with the internship experience but to investigate the effects of satisfaction upon their affective occupational commitment for the field and their subsequent intentions to pursue employment within it. Using a sample size of 248 students from two large state universities over nine semesters,

the researchers collected data related to internship satisfaction using a 7-point Likert scale based survey. A positive correlation between internship satisfaction and desire to pursue full-time positions in sport management was found. The study found that students provided with excellent work experiences and those using previously learned skills had high level of satisfaction. Similarly, Christen et al. (2006) found that a higher perception of job performance leads to higher levels of job satisfaction. If that occurs, as Christen et al. suggested, then using the result of Koo et al. (2016), one may assume that intern experiencing high levels of job performance may be more likely to pursue a full-time position in sport management than interns that struggle with tasks and responsibilities in an internship.

Similarly, Sauder and Mudrick (2018) examined satisfaction and perceived learning in the sport management internship. The study found that of 172 respondents, most were satisfied with their internship. Notably, satisfaction with academic aspects of the internship was much lower. The study also identified a perceived gap between theoretical classroom learning and practical learning in the field. Building upon Koo et al. (2016), Sauder and Mudrick (2018) found that while satisfaction is high due to a student perception that the internship is a valuable, necessary step in career advancement, there may be a gap in the preparation students receive in their sport management academic programs.

Surujlal and Singh (2010) examined the sport management internship as a mechanism of professional preparation in their native South Africa. The country's labor market had seen high unemployment rates and a shortage of skilled workers. Due to this issue and the shift in higher education toward experiential learning experiences, and away from lectures, Surujlal and Singh chose to focus an experiential learning in sport, something they stated

is a rarity. The participants, students who had completed an internship with a sport organization within the previous three years, were given a 47-item questionnaire based upon a 5-point Likert scale. The study found that internships in sport management were of value to the subjects and helped them learn new skills, helped discover themselves as professionals, and gave them more insight into the sports industry.

Surujlal and Serra (2014) used qualitative methods to study the perceptions of sport management interns of rotations in the internships. Because sport management recent graduates are expected to be well-versed in the duties of their first job from day one, universities must understand these market demands and work to prepare students in creative ways. Surujal and Serra state that sport management programs have treated the internship as a supplement to sport management curriculum and not as a key part of it. A case study method was chosen and focused on a cohort of sport management honors students (n=24) at the University of Johannesburg. Each student completed an internship that included rotational processes as opposed to working in a single area or at a single site. The subjects were then asked to rank the most effective and interesting rotations. The study found that handson areas, such as event management, gymnasium, and facility management were more rated more effective than the administration areas of recruitment and scholarships and finance.

## 9. Preparation for Sport Management Internships

While internships certainly have value to students, evidence suggests that students in sport management may lack key competencies to excel at internships (Sattler & Achen, 2021). Sport management students may face competition for sports industry internships from students in other degree fields (King, 2009; Sattler & Achen, 2021). This may be a result of a gap in sport management curriculum offerings (Sattler & Achen, 2021). Practitioners and hiring managers in the field may be seeking skills that sport management programs currently do not teach (Mathner & Martin 2012; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Sattler & Achen, 2021). Supplements to curriculum, including pre-internship experiences and other types of exertional learning have been suggested to help fill this gap (Foster & Dollar, 2017; Brown et al., 2018).

DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove (2016) evaluated sport management student preparedness for internships. A mixed methods study, the researchers used both a Likert-scale-based survey and focus groups to gauge how prepared 136 sport management students perceived themselves to be for internships. The study also asked for site supervisor feedback. Both quantitative and qualitative data were used. The majority of interns were unpaid. An individual sport management curriculum from a singular program, of which all students were students or graduates, and interns were asked which courses were valuable to the internship experience. Only three of the seven were found to valuable. The most valuable courses were Introduction to Sport Industry, Sport Management, and Sport Marketing. The other four major requirements were sociology based and included Sport & Society and Sport: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. Practitioners mentioned that students lacked many skills, including communication, to fully succeed in the workplace. DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove notably found that career development should be purposefully embedded in the sport management curriculum to justify the value of the degree.

Sattler and Achen (2021) examined the other side of this issue. That study focused on internship job announcements in an effort to ascertain what skills hiring managers seek in interns. The study focused on a well-known sports industry job site. Using quantitative methods, 215 internship announcements were coded by 24 variables, allowing the researchers to determine the frequency and percentage of certain terms. Skills such as computer skills, communication skills, and writing were among the most mentioned. The study also found that marketing and communications degrees were mentioned more often than sport management degrees for internships on a sport industry specific job site. Noting, DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove, Sattler and Achen suggested that limitations in the sport management curriculum may be limiting current students.

Mathner and Martin (2012) looked at student's career expectations in the sport industry. An exploratory design to compare career perceptions between sport management students and sport industry practitioners. The study found that practitioners rank marketing skills as less important than technological skills, while students felt that marketing was more important. Practitioners ranked skills like leadership, management, and communication as the most important for potential interns to possess. Again, Mathner and Martin suggested that the curriculum must be tweaked to emphasize these on-the-job skills that employers seek.

While curriculum is certainly of great importance,

there are other ways to prepare students for internships, primarily through experiential learning (Brown et al., 2018). Brown et al. suggest an internship seminar course as a part to core curriculum to better prepare students with on-the-job skills. Foster and Dollar (2017) suggest that students be exposed to the industry prior to the internship through guest speakers, shadowing, and volunteer work experiences. The suggestion that volunteerism with the institution's athletic department or another local sports organization is also made. Brown et al. (2018) noted that 64.5% of employers prefer to hire candidates with relevant work experience, even for entry-level roles.

### 10. Conclusion and Future Research Opportunities

The importance of internships in the sport management undergraduate curriculum cannot be overstated (Walker et al., 2021). These experiential learning opportunities are the first step towards transforming students into proficient practitioners in the field of sports (Brown et al., 2018). Not only do internships provide a way to learn theoretical knowledge, but they can also profoundly influence a student's inclination and commitment to pursuing a career in the industry after graduation (Koo et al., 2016). As the importance of internships has become increasingly evident, numerous sport management programs have implemented initiatives to facilitate enriching experiences, such as informal networking and structured systems that match students with industry partners. The existing research has mostly focused on student satisfaction with their internship experience, but a critical junction remains unexplored: the alignment of contentment with the degree of preparedness instilled by their sport management education (Chinomano

& Surujal, 2012; Koo et al., 2016). This gap necessitates a closer relationship between the academic curriculum and the practical requirements of the industry.

Looking ahead, attention must be paid to sport management internships, especially due to the recent changes in society's focus on civil and social justice. Walker et al. (2021) have made a start in discussing privilege, but there is still more to explore regarding equitable opportunities and varied experiences within sport management internships. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused disruptions in the American workforce, as seen in sectors such as tourism, events, and hospitality (Park & Jones, 2021). Consequently, a comprehensive investigation into the changes in sport management internships in the face of remote work dynamics, such as the viability and efficacy of virtual internships, is essential. As hybrid or completely remote work models become more common, it will be important to examine the effectiveness of virtual internships in comparison to traditional inperson ones (Haan, 2023).

In summary, internships are not just a step but a bridge connecting theoretical foundations with practical realities. By addressing the current gaps in research and taking into account equity, virtual experiences, and changing industry requirements, we can improve the symbiotic relationship between academic preparation and industry engagement. This all-encompassing approach will provide aspiring sport management professionals with the skill and resilience needed to succeed in the ever-changing sports industry.

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