

Transforming Sport Management Internships into Developmental Ecosystems: A Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Student Satisfaction, Learning, and Career Readiness

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Abstract

Internships represent a cornerstone of sport management education, serving as a critical bridge between academic preparation and professional practice. Despite their widespread adoption, limited conceptual integration exists regarding how structured internship design can systematically enhance student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and career readiness. Drawing upon relevant theoretical perspectives, this paper proposes a comprehensive framework to maximize and enhance student satisfaction and learning experiences in sport management programs. Using the structured internship model at a US college as a case, this framework integrates required experiential engagement, reflective portfolio development, structured self-evaluation (SWOB: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Barriers), and post-internship career planning. The proposed model positions structured internships not merely as work experiences but as developmental learning ecosystems that foster cognitive, affective, and professional growth. Implications for accreditation standards (e.g., COSMA), curriculum design, and student career development are discussed.

Keywords: *sport management education, internships, experiential learning, student satisfaction, career readiness, reflective practice, professional identity*

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1. Introduction

Sport management education occupies a unique position within higher education as an applied discipline that must simultaneously develop conceptual understanding and industry-specific competencies. Unlike purely theoretical academic fields, sport management programs are expected to prepare graduates for immediate entry into professional environments characterized by competitive labor markets, experiential demands, and dynamic organizational cultures (Parkhouse, 2005; Pederesen & Thibault, 2014). Within this context, internships have emerged as one of the most critical pedagogical mechanisms for bridging academic preparation and industry practice. Kuh (2008) identified experiential learning activities, including internships, as high-impact educational practices that meaningfully deepen student engagement, retention, and post-graduation success.

The sport industry is particularly reliant on experiential education given its project-based, relationship-intensive, and event-driven operational character (Lough & Kim, 2022; Stier, 2002). Employers in sport organizations routinely cite practical experience, professional network development, and demonstrated competency as primary hiring criteria (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; Dixon & Turner, 2018). In response, accrediting bodies such as the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) have embedded experiential learning requirements into standards for program quality (COSMA, 2023). Yet despite this structural mandate, considerable variability exists in how programs design, supervise, and assess internship experiences (Stier, 2002; Young & Baker, 2004).

Despite their centrality, internships are often conceptualized narrowly as graduation requirements measured primarily in credit hours rather than developmental impact. This administrative framing obscures the transformative potential of internships when they are intentionally structured and integrated within curriculum (Sweitzer & King, 2014). The effectiveness of an internship does not derive merely from exposure to industry settings. Rather, its developmental impact depends on how experience is structured, supervised, reflected upon, and integrated into a student's evolving professional identity (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983).

The current study argues that sport management internships should be reconceptualized as developmental ecosystems in which experiential engagement, structured reflection, faculty mentorship, and career planning interact to produce cognitive, affective, and professional outcomes. Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives, this study proposes a comprehensive conceptual framework that explains how structured internship design enhances student satisfaction, learning, and career readiness.

Specifically, this study addresses the following research question:

How does structured internship design influence student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and career readiness through reflective and developmental mechanisms?

By answering this question, the study advances a theoretically integrated model that positions reflective integration as a central mechanism linking experience to developmental outcomes. The paper

proceeds by reviewing relevant theoretical frameworks, developing each dimension of the proposed ecosystem model, articulating programmatic and faculty implications, and identifying directions for future empirical research.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Internships in Sport Management Education

Internships in sport management have been studied from multiple perspectives. Prior research emphasized structural characteristics such as duration, placement setting, and credit requirements (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1994; Stier, 2002). More recent work has explored the relationship between internship quality and student outcomes including job placement, professional competency, and satisfaction (Dixon & Turner, 2018; Lough & Kim, 2022). Despite this accumulated knowledge, the field lacks a unified conceptual model that integrates structural, motivational, reflective, and identity-based dimensions of the internship experience.

Cuneen and Sidwell (1994) conducted foundational work identifying essential competencies sport management interns should develop, including operational skills, communication proficiency, and professional conduct. Building on this competency orientation, Young and Baker (2004) argued that internship learning should be formally linked to curriculum through structured assignments and faculty oversight. Stier (2002) further emphasized the importance of placement quality and supervisory relationships in determining internship outcomes. Dixon and Turner (2018) extended this line of inquiry by examining gender differences in

internship experience within collegiate athletic departments, revealing differential access to developmental opportunities.

More broadly, the higher education literature supports the developmental value of well-structured experiential learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008). Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles for good undergraduate education—including active learning, prompt feedback, and student-faculty contact—align closely with the characteristics of structured internships. Kuh's (2008) research on high-impact practices demonstrated that activities requiring integrative and reflective engagement produce stronger student outcomes across diverse demographic backgrounds. These insights provide empirical justification for investing in structured internship design within sport management curricula.

Despite growing empirical attention to sport management internships, several conceptual and practical gaps persist. First, most existing studies treat the internship as a unidimensional variable, examining either its structural features or its outcomes without integrating the mechanisms through which structure produces outcomes (Sweitzer & King, 2014). Second, the motivational and identity-based dimensions of internship experience remain theoretically underexplored in sport management contexts. Third, while individual theories such as experiential learning have been applied to internship education, multi-theoretical integration that simultaneously captures cognitive, affective, and social processes is largely absent from the literature (Lough & Kim, 2022).

The present paper addresses these gaps by proposing a developmental ecosystem framework that synthesizes multiple theoretical perspectives and specifies the mechanisms through which structured internship design produces learning, satisfaction, and career readiness outcomes. This framework is intended to serve both as a conceptual contribution to the sport management education literature and as a practical guide for program administrators and faculty.

Theoretical Framework

The proposed framework conceptualizes sport management internships as developmental ecosystems that enhance student learning, satisfaction, and career readiness through structured experiential engagement, reflection, mentorship, and career planning. To explain these developmental processes, the framework integrates several complementary theoretical perspectives, including experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), human capital theory (Becker, 1993), self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), social cognitive career theory (Lent et al., 1994), transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1991), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). Together, these perspectives provide a multidimensional understanding of how structured internships facilitate cognitive, affective, and professional growth.

Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) serves as the foundational framework for understanding internship learning. Kolb proposed that learning occurs through a cyclical process involving concrete experience, reflective observation,

abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Internships naturally provide students with concrete professional experiences; however, the developmental value of those experiences depends largely on opportunities for structured reflection and integration. Reflective activities such as journals, synthesis papers, and portfolio development encourage students to critically examine their experiences, connect practice to theory, and transform experiential exposure into transferable knowledge and professional competence. Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner further supports the importance of reflection by emphasizing that professional growth occurs when individuals actively evaluate and reinterpret their experiences within real-world settings.

Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1993) explains internships as investments in skill development and employability. Internships allow students to acquire both general competencies—such as communication, leadership, and problem-solving—and sport-specific competencies, including event operations, sponsorship activation, ticket sales, and sport marketing. From a labor market perspective, internships increase students' professional value by enhancing productivity and signaling competence to employers. Structured portfolio requirements and artifact documentation strengthen this signaling process by providing tangible evidence of applied skills and accomplishments. As the sport industry becomes increasingly competitive, employers consistently prioritize graduates who possess practical experience and demonstrated competency (Dixon & Turner, 2018; Lough & Kim, 2022). Consequently, structured

internship programs play a critical role in preparing students for professional entry and career advancement.

Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) contributes to understanding the motivational and affective dimensions of internship experiences. According to the theory, individuals experience greater satisfaction and engagement when three psychological needs are fulfilled: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within internship contexts, autonomy refers to opportunities for meaningful participation and decision-making; competence reflects the development of professional skills and confidence; and relatedness involves supportive relationships with supervisors, coworkers, faculty mentors, and industry professionals. Internships that provide meaningful responsibilities, constructive feedback, and professional integration are therefore more likely to produce higher levels of student satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. In contrast, poorly structured internships characterized by repetitive tasks, limited supervision, or social isolation may undermine student engagement and developmental outcomes.

Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and *Social Cognitive Career Theory* (Lent et al., 1994) further explain how internships contribute to career development and professional identity formation. *Career Construction Theory* emphasizes that individuals actively construct their professional identities through reflection, adaptation, and meaning-making. Internships serve as opportunities for students to test career interests, evaluate organizational fit, and clarify long-term pro-

fessional goals. Structured self-evaluation activities, such as the SWOB (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Barriers) framework, encourage students to reflect on their competencies, identify developmental needs, and strategically plan future career pathways.

Social Cognitive Career Theory highlights the importance of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and environmental supports in making career decisions. Internship experiences provide mastery opportunities that strengthen students' confidence in their professional abilities. Positive supervisory feedback, mentorship, and successful task completion enhance self-efficacy and encourage continued engagement within the sport industry. At the same time, the theory acknowledges that environmental barriers and supports influence career development outcomes. Faculty mentorship, inclusive placement opportunities, and supportive organizational environments therefore become important factors in maximizing internship effectiveness.

Communities of Practice Theory (Wenger, 1998) explains internships as processes of professional socialization. According to Wenger, learning occurs through participation within professional communities where newcomers gradually move from peripheral participation toward fuller membership. Internships expose students to the norms, language, expectations, and practices of the sport industry while allowing them to build professional networks and workplace relationships. Through interactions with supervisors, colleagues, and industry professionals, students begin developing a sense of professional identity and belonging within the sport management field.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives suggest that internships should not be viewed simply as work experiences or graduation requirements. Rather, internships function as developmental ecosystems in which experiential engagement, reflection, mentorship, and career planning interact to foster student learning, satisfaction, professional identity development, and career readiness. Structured internship design therefore becomes essential for maximizing both educational and professional outcomes within sport management programs.

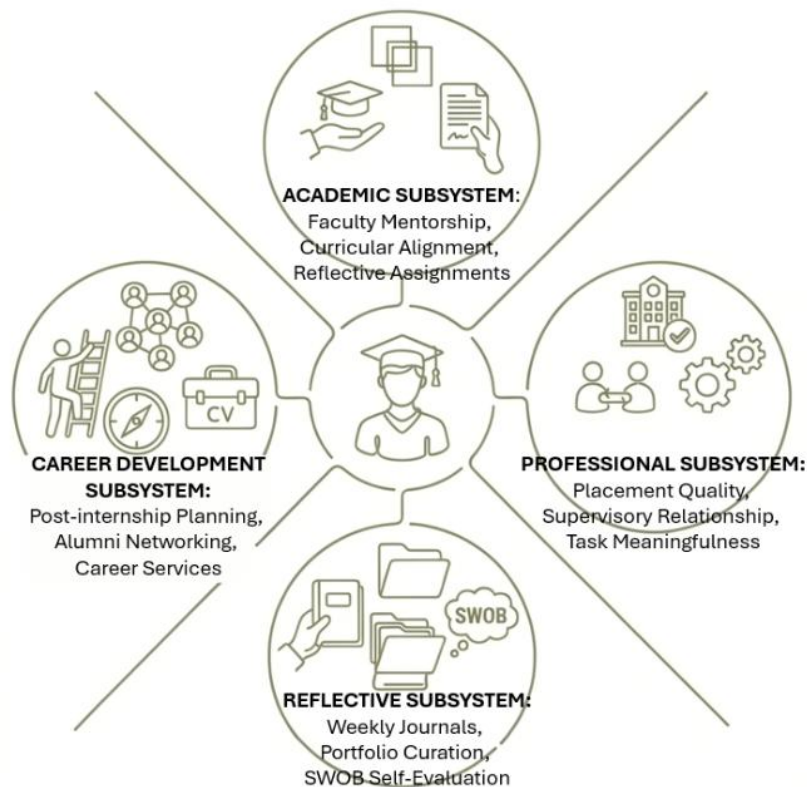
3. Reconceptualizing the Internship as a Developmental Ecosystem

The theoretical perspectives reviewed in this

study converge on a common conclusion: the developmental value of internships is not determined solely by workplace exposure, but by the quality of the structures, relationships, and reflective processes that surround the experience. Internships should therefore be reconceptualized not simply as temporary work placements or graduation requirements, but as developmental ecosystems that integrate experiential learning, mentorship, structured reflection, and career planning into a coherent educational process. Within this framework, learning emerges through the interaction of multiple interconnected components rather than through experience alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

Figure 1

The Developmental Internship Ecosystem Framework



As shown in Figure 1, the concept of a developmental ecosystem emphasizes that internship effectiveness depends on the integration of academic, professional, reflective, and career-development subsystems. Similar to ecological systems in which the health of the environment influences individual growth, the quality of an internship experience depends on the interaction between faculty mentorship, organizational support, reflective activities, and professional engagement opportunities. Structured internships therefore create environments in which students actively construct knowledge, develop professional identities, and prepare for long-term career success.

The Academic Subsystem

The Academic Subsystem provides the structural foundation of the internship experience. Faculty members establish learning objectives, supervise student progress, evaluate assignments, and connect experiential learning to classroom theory. Structured academic requirements—including reflective journals, synthesis papers, presentations, and portfolio assignments—ensure that students critically analyze their experiences rather than simply complete work tasks. Faculty mentorship also helps students contextualize professional experiences within broader sport management concepts, thereby strengthening the transferability of learning across professional settings. Without intentional academic integration, internships risk becoming disconnected workplace experiences with limited educational impact.

The Professional Subsystem

The Professional Subsystem consists of the organizational environment in which students are embedded. Placement quality, supervisory relationships, task meaningfulness, and workplace culture collectively influence students' developmental outcomes. High-quality internship sites provide meaningful responsibilities, mentorship opportunities, and exposure to real organizational operations rather than repetitive administrative tasks. Through participation in meetings, event operations, marketing activities, sponsorship activation, ticket sales, and customer engagement, students gain practical competencies and develop professional confidence. Internship supervisors play an important role in this process by providing feedback, modeling professional behavior, and facilitating organizational integration. Supportive professional environments strengthen students' sense of competence and belonging while helping them understand the expectations and realities of the sport industry.

The Reflective Subsystem

The Reflective Subsystem functions as the mechanism that transforms experience into learning. Experiential Learning Theory emphasizes that concrete experiences alone do not guarantee meaningful development unless students engage in reflective observation and conceptual integration (Kolb, 1984). Structured reflective activities encourage students to critically examine their successes, challenges, emotional responses, and professional growth throughout the internship process. Weekly reflective journals, portfolio narratives, and synthesis papers help students identify

patterns, connect theory to practice, and develop transferable professional insights.

A central reflective component within the developmental ecosystem is the SWOB (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Barriers) self-evaluation framework. Unlike traditional evaluations that focus solely on performance outcomes, the SWOB framework encourages metacognitive reflection and career self-assessment. Students identify personal strengths and competencies developed during the internship (Bandura, 1997), recognize areas requiring improvement (Deci & Ryan, 2000), explore professional opportunities, and evaluate barriers that may affect future career advancement (Savickas, 2005). This process supports self-awareness, adaptability, and professional identity formation while encouraging students to take active ownership of their career development.

The Career Development Subsystem

The Career Development Subsystem connects internship experiences to long-term professional trajectories. Internships should not end with the completion of required hours; rather, they should function as developmental checkpoints that guide future career planning and professional growth. Post-internship career discussions, portfolio development, alumni networking, and mentorship opportunities help students translate experiential insights into actionable career strategies. Through these activities, students gain greater clarity regarding career interests, organizational fit, graduate education opportunities, and professional goals (Kolb, 1984; Savickas, 2005).

Importantly, these subsystems do not operate

independently. The developmental ecosystem is characterized by strong interdependence among its components. The quality of professional tasks influences the depth of reflective learning; faculty mentorship shapes the effectiveness of career planning; and reflective activities strengthen professional identity development. Weaknesses in one subsystem may reduce the effectiveness of the entire ecosystem, while strengths in one area may amplify positive outcomes across others. For example, meaningful workplace responsibilities combined with structured reflection and faculty guidance are more likely to produce deep learning and professional growth than workplace exposure alone. Within this ecosystem framework, students are positioned as active participants rather than passive recipients of experience. Students are expected to engage in continuous reflection, skill development, relationship building, and career planning throughout the internship process. This active engagement aligns with contemporary theories of experiential learning and professional identity development, which emphasize agency, adaptability, and self-directed growth.

The developmental ecosystem perspective also highlights the importance of multiple and sequential internship experiences in facilitating long-term professional growth. Early internships often serve exploratory purposes by helping students evaluate professional interests, organizational fit, and career aspirations. As students progress through additional internship experiences, they gain opportunities for specialization, skill diversification, and deeper industry engagement. Through repeated experiential cycles combined

with structured reflection and mentorship, students gradually develop adaptive expertise, stronger professional identities, and greater career readiness. Accordingly, internships should not be

viewed as isolated educational activities, but rather as part of a continuous developmental process in which students revisit and refine competencies at increasingly advanced levels.

Table 1

Sequential Stages of the TOLD Internship Development Model

Stage and Description	Content
Testing Trying out/exploring self	Subjective knowledge, competency, marketability, fit
Observing Reviewing/reflecting on the experience	Physical environment, job responsibility, daily routine, behavior
Learning Acquiring new experience	Practical knowledge, practical skills (technological, people, conceptual), job training, professionalism
Developing/Enhancing Existing competencies	Network, hard and soft skills, knowledge, work ethic

Note. TOLD = Testing, Observing, Learning, Developing/Enhancing. The model conceptualizes internships as a dynamic developmental process through which students progressively advance professional and personal competencies through sequential internship experiences.

As shown in Table 1, the TOLD model conceptualizes internships as a dynamic developmental process through which students progressively advance their professional and personal competencies. The acronym TOLD represents four interconnected stages of internship development: Testing, Observing, Learning, and Developing/Enhancing. Rather than viewing internships as a single isolated experience, the model emphasizes that meaningful professional growth emerges through multiple and sequential internship experiences over time.

The first stage, Testing, involves students exploring their interests, abilities, and career fit

within a professional setting. During this phase, interns assess their subjective knowledge, competency levels, marketability, and compatibility with the organization or industry. Students begin to evaluate whether a particular career path aligns with their personal goals, values, and strengths.

The second stage, Observing, focuses on reflection and environmental awareness. Interns carefully examine workplace culture, job responsibilities, daily routines, professional behavior, and organizational dynamics. Through observation, students gain a realistic understanding of industry expectations and begin socializing into professional norms.

The third stage, Learning, centers on acquiring new knowledge and skills. Students develop practical knowledge, technological competencies, conceptual understanding, interpersonal communication abilities, and professionalism through hands-on experience and job training. This phase bridges classroom learning with applied industry practice.

The Developing/Enhancing stage represents the accumulation and refinement of professional capital. Interns strengthen networks, enhance hard and soft skills, expand knowledge, and cultivate a stronger work ethic. Repeated internship experiences further reinforce confidence, career readiness, and professional identity.

The TOLD model emphasizes that sequential internship experiences allow students to revisit each developmental stage at progressively higher levels of complexity and responsibility. Early internships may focus primarily on testing and observing, whereas later experiences increasingly emphasize learning, specialization, leadership development, and professional enhancement. Consequently, multiple internships create a cumulative developmental trajectory that better prepares students for sustained career success in sport management and related industries.

4. Multidimensional Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction in internship contexts should be understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, affective, and professional identity dimensions (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Sweitzer & King, 2014). Traditional approaches that conceptualize internship satisfaction as a single measure of enjoyment or positive affect over-

look the diverse mechanisms through which internship experiences contribute to student development.

Cognitive satisfaction refers to students' perceptions of learning and knowledge acquisition during the internship experience. Students experiencing high cognitive satisfaction believe the internship provided meaningful opportunities to apply classroom knowledge, develop practical skills, and increase industry understanding. Structured internship programs support cognitive satisfaction by encouraging reflection and experiential learning through activities such as journals, mentorship, and guided discussions (Kolb, 1984).

Affective satisfaction reflects the emotional and relational aspects of the internship experience, including confidence, belongingness, motivation, and relational fulfillment. This dimension is strongly associated with psychological need fulfillment, particularly autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Internships that provide supportive supervision, meaningful mentorship, and inclusive organizational environments foster positive emotional experiences that contribute to long-term professional engagement and career commitment.

Professional identity satisfaction refers to students' clarity and confidence regarding their professional goals and career direction following the internship. Students with high professional identity satisfaction report that internships helped confirm career interests, strengthen occupational fit, and improve professional self-presentation. Structured reflection and self-evaluation activities support identity development by encouraging students to connect internship experiences with long-

term career planning and professional aspirations (Savickas, 2005).

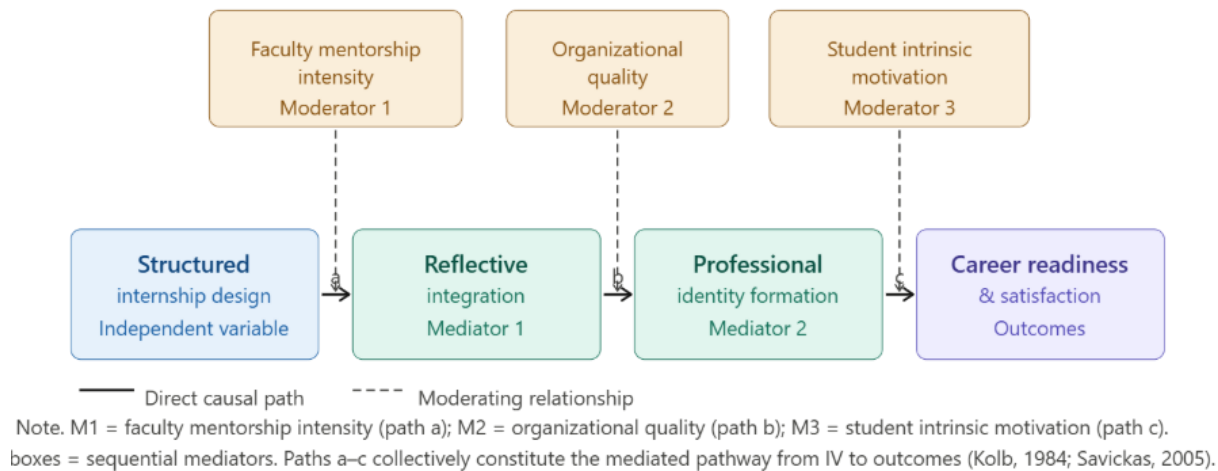
5. Proposed Conceptual Framework

As shown in Figure 2, the proposed conceptual framework integrates the theoretical and empirical perspectives reviewed above into a coherent model of structured internship development. The framework specifies the independent variable

(structured internship design), the mediating mechanisms (reflective integration and professional identity formation), the moderating conditions (faculty mentorship intensity, organizational quality, and student intrinsic motivation), and the primary outcomes (career readiness and multidimensional student satisfaction). This specification provides a testable theoretical architecture for future empirical investigation.

Figure 2

Proposed Conceptual Framework for Structured Internship Development



Structured internship design is conceptualized as the primary independent variable, operationalized through the presence and rigor of six core components: weekly reflective journals, artifact portfolio requirements, SWOB self-evaluation, employer evaluations with developmental feedback protocols, a culminating synthesis paper, and a post-internship career planning session. Programs vary considerably in whether and how rigorously these components are implemented, and this variation is hypothesized to predict meaningful differences in developmental outcomes.

Reflective integration—the degree to which students actively engage in systematic reflection that transforms experience into generalizable knowledge—is proposed as the primary mediating mechanism linking structured design to cognitive and affective outcomes (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991). Reflective integration is operationalized through the depth and conceptual sophistication of weekly journal entries, the quality and comprehensiveness of portfolio narratives, and the analytical rigor of SWOB self-evaluations. Professional identity formation—the clarity, confidence, and

stability of students' professional self-concept—is proposed as a second mediating mechanism linking reflective integration to career readiness and professional identity satisfaction (Savickas, 2005; Wenger, 1998).

Faculty mentorship intensity is proposed as a key moderator of the relationship between structured design and reflective integration. When faculty engage actively in reviewing reflective journals, providing substantive feedback on portfolio development, and facilitating post-internship career planning conversations, they amplify the developmental impact of each structured component. Organizational quality—the meaningfulness of tasks assigned, the expertise and accessibility of on-site supervisors, and the richness of the professional community into which the intern is integrated—moderates the relationship between professional experience and identity formation. Students placed in organizations that provide meaningful responsibilities, skilled mentorship, and genuine community integration develop stronger professional identities through their placements (Wenger, 1998). Student intrinsic motivation, informed by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), moderates the relationship between reflective integration and developmental outcomes, as students who are intrinsically motivated engage more deeply with reflective assignments and derive greater developmental benefit from them.

This framework emphasizes that experience alone is insufficient for producing the full range of developmental outcomes associated with high-quality internship participation. Structured reflection and integration are essential mediators that

transform exposure into transferable competence, professional identity, and career readiness. Programs that invest in the design and oversight of these reflective mechanisms—and in the faculty capacity to support them—are positioned to produce meaningfully stronger developmental outcomes than programs that rely on exposure alone (Kuh, 2008; Sweitzer & King, 2014).

6. Implications for Sport Management Programs

The developmental ecosystem framework proposed in this paper carries significant implications for sport management program administrators, faculty, accreditation bodies, and career services professionals. These implications are organized across three domains: programmatic design, faculty roles, and accreditation alignment.

Programmatic Implications

Curriculum Integration

Internships should not be isolated from the broader curriculum but systematically integrated with preceding coursework, concurrent seminars, and subsequent capstone experiences. Curricular integration ensures that experiential learning is contextualized within academic frameworks, that theoretical concepts are tested and deepened through applied experience, and that professional insights are translated back into academic understanding. Programs should design pre-internship preparation courses that equip students with the theoretical vocabulary and reflective tools necessary to extract maximum developmental benefit from their placements (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Kuh, 2008). As such, internships should

connect with capstone courses, career seminars, and alumni mentorship.

Assessment Mechanisms

Structured assessment mechanisms are essential for ensuring that internship programs deliver

on their developmental promise and for enabling continuous program improvement. Table 2 presents the core assessment components of the structured internship model and their theoretical alignment.

Table 2

Structured Internship Assessment Components, Purposes, and Theoretical Alignments

Component	Purpose	Aligned Theory
Weekly Reflective Journal	Transforms experience into generalizable knowledge	Kolb (1984); Mezirow (1991)
Artifact Portfolio	Documents and signals competency development	Becker (1993); Schön (1983)
SWOB Self-Evaluation	Promotes metacognitive career authoring	Savickas (2005); Bandura (1997)
Employer Mid-Term & Final Evaluation	Provides external competence feedback	Deci & Ryan (2000); Lent et al. (1994)
Post-Internship Career Planning Session	Integrates experiences into future career strategy	Savickas (2005); Super (1990)
Culminating Synthesis Paper	Integrates theory with applied practice	Kolb (1984); Mezirow (1991)

Accreditation Alignment

The Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) has established experiential learning as a core element of quality sport management education (COSMA, 2023). The developmental ecosystem framework proposed in this paper directly addresses COSMA's standards for applied learning, competency development, and career preparation. Programs seeking accreditation or reaccreditation would benefit from docu-

menting not only the structural features of their internship programs (credit hours, site approval processes, supervisor qualifications) but also the quality of their reflective architecture, assessment mechanisms, and curricular integration.

Implications for Faculty

Faculty play a central and irreplaceable role in the developmental ecosystem. As developmental architects, faculty are responsible for designing

the reflective infrastructure of the internship program: the assignments, rubrics, feedback protocols, and integration activities through which experience is transformed into learning. As mentors, faculty provide the relational support and professional guidance that sustains student motivation and facilitates identity development.

Effective faculty mentorship in internship contexts differs meaningfully from traditional classroom instruction. Rather than transmitting content knowledge, faculty in mentorship roles facilitate reflective dialogue, pose generative questions, provide candid developmental feedback, and draw connections between professional observations and theoretical constructs. This facilitative orientation requires distinct relational skills and pedagogical commitments that may not be systematically developed through traditional faculty preparation pathways. Programs should invest in faculty development opportunities that build capacity for experiential education mentorship, including training in reflective questioning techniques, portfolio assessment practices, and career development facilitation.

Faculty can also play a critical role in building and maintaining the quality of placement organizations. Through intentional cultivation of industry partnerships—identifying placements that align with program learning objectives, negotiating meaningful task assignments, and establishing supervisory expectations with host organization contacts—faculty function as environmental engineers who shape the quality of the professional subsystem within which their students are embedded (Wenger, 1998). This placement development role requires sustained industry engagement that

extends beyond individual student supervision to include alumni relationships, professional association participation, and ongoing employer communication.

7. Directions for Future Research

The proposed developmental ecosystem framework is explicitly conceptual, integrates existing theoretical perspectives, and generates testable propositions about the relationships among structured internship design, reflective mechanisms, and developmental outcomes. Empirical validation of these propositions represents an important and feasible research agenda for sport management education scholars.

Longitudinal research designs are particularly well-suited to testing the career development propositions of the framework. Studies tracking students from pre-internship through multiple post-graduation timepoints could examine whether structured versus unstructured internship participation predicts differential trajectories of career adaptability, professional identity stability, and occupational satisfaction. Such designs would provide the causal evidence necessary to justify program investments in structured internship architecture and to identify the specific components most strongly associated with long-term career outcomes (Savickas, 2005; Super, 1990).

Comparative studies examining developmental outcomes across structured and unstructured internship programs would provide the strongest evidence for the causal role of structured design in producing developmental outcomes. Such studies face significant methodological challenges, in-

cluding selection bias and the difficulty of operationalizing "structure" consistently across diverse program contexts. Mixed-method designs that combine quantitative outcome measurement with qualitative analysis of student internship narratives could address some of these challenges by providing rich, contextually nuanced accounts of how structural features shape developmental experience (Creswell, 2014).

Finally, research examining the effectiveness of specific reflective tools—including portfolio rubrics, reflective prompting frameworks, and SWOB assessment protocols—would provide actionable guidance for program administrators seeking to improve the quality of their reflective infrastructure. Design-based research approaches (Brown, 1992) that iteratively refine and test reflective interventions in authentic program contexts could produce both theoretical insights and practically useful tools for the sport management education community.

8. Conclusion

Internships represent transformative opportunities within sport management education, yet their impact depends fundamentally on intentional design. When structured as developmental ecosystems incorporating reflective architecture, portfolio documentation, structured self-evaluation, and post-internship career integration, internships become powerful mechanisms for enhancing learning, satisfaction, and career readiness. Reframing internships from administrative requirements to developmental checkpoints strengthens curriculum coherence and supports long-term professional success. By embedding structure, reflection, and integration within internship architecture, sport management programs can maximize both educational and professional outcomes for their students.

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