

Sport Management Study Abroad and International Exchange Program Innovation for a Post COVID-19 Era



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Abstract

The globalization of the sport industry has required sport management programs to create strategies for internationalizing students. Study abroad programs are a prominent example of those strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on study abroad programs in Spring of 2020. Many students had their study abroad experiences either cut short or canceled all together. The purpose of this essay is to discuss how the student learning process can continue during an interruption or cancellation of study abroad and international exchange programs due to a pandemic or other global issues. Using an observational study, we asked the following research questions: RQ1: What can the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to higher education teach the sport management community to ensure students are able to engage in experiential and transformative learning? RQ2: What strategies can institutions of higher education implement to provide students with continued opportunities to benefit from the types of engagements traditionally associated with international programming? We offer recommendations that will help sport management programs prepare for future interruptions to study abroad experiences. These recommendations aim at fostering experiential and transformative learning despite disruptions to the traditional study abroad experience.

Keywords: study abroad; sport management; experiential learning; transformative learning

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1. Introduction

The global nature of sport and the increasing emphasis that higher education places on meaningful connections between classroom learning and real-world experience is magnifying the importance of study abroad and international exchange programs (Baker et al., 2016; Miragaia & Soares, 2017). Studying abroad offers sport management students myriad potential benefits: the opportunity to enhance cultural awareness (Black & Duhon, 2006), increase creative thinking (Lee et al., 2012), augment professional growth and cognitive development (Kelleher, 2013), and create higher levels of cultural pluralism in sport management students (LeCrom et al., 2015). However, in March 2020, institutions of higher education throughout the United States began responding to the intensifying COVID-19 pandemic by asking students studying abroad to return to the United States. One of the many negative repercussions of adjusting to COVID-19 in the spring of 2020 was students having to cut short their valuable learning experiences derived from studying abroad, as well as the cancellation of future international educational opportunities. However, the Coronavirus' consequences also present an opportunity to innovate. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to discuss how the student learning process can continue during an interruption or cancellation of study abroad and international exchange programs due to a pandemic or other global issues.

2. Literature Review

Globalization of sport is increasing and there are many hallmarks one can cite to demonstrate

this point. These include (a) the amount of international scouting and recruiting in professional and college sport is increasing; (b) broadcasting of games in foreign countries continues to rise; (c) scheduling of games in foreign countries is becoming commonplace; (d) the sale of team merchandise around the world is a growing part of business plans; and (e) cross-border investing in team ownership has escalated in recent years (Dickson & Santos, 2017). Specific examples are the National Basketball Association (NBA) steadily increasing its presence in China for more than a decade (Zhou et al., 2017) and athletic programs in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recruiting and signing tens of thousands of international student athletes (Foo et al., 2015).

In addition to the traditional North American professional and college sports, globalization can be seen in the blurring of sport, leisure, tourism, and entertainment industries that has led to the emergence of esports (Reitman et al., 2020), mega events (Lauremann, 2019), and sport tourism (Van Rheenen et al., 2017) sport management segments. Further, the field of sport for development and peace (SDP) has proliferated during the last several decades (Welty Peachy & Cohen, 2015), with SDP organizations operating on almost every continent (Svensson & Woods, 2017). The increasing globalization of sport has made study abroad programs in sport management a more important tool in the preparation of students for careers in sport management (LeCrom et al., 2015).

Internationalization is a way to respond to an increase in globalization (Danylchuk, 2011). It has been suggested sport management programs can

use internationalization strategies to prepare students for work in a globalized sport industry and remain competitive in attracting those students (Baker et al., 2016). Internationalization strategies should involve learning experiences and internships in international sport organizations (Miragaia & Soares, 2017). Additionally, Baker et al. (2016) recommended the use of meaningful, interactive, and authentic intercultural contact to prepare students for the globalized sport industry. One of the ways sport management programs have addressed these internationalization strategies is by incorporating study abroad and international exchange programs.

Study abroad programs generally involve students completing part of their degree requirements outside the United States. These programs have been found to provide multiple benefits for students. The potential to interact with different cultures offers the opportunity to enhance cultural awareness (Black & Duhon, 2006). Lee et al. (2012) found that the cultural experience of studying abroad can enhance creative thinking. Research on nursing students studying abroad identified professional growth, cultural sensitivity, and cognitive development as benefits of participation (Kelleher, 2013). In the field of sport management, study abroad programs have been found to be an effective global education model (Choi et al., 2013). Additionally, study abroad programs created higher levels of cultural pluralism in sport management students (LeCrom, et al., 2015).

Jill Welch, the deputy executive director for public policy for the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), enumerated several reasons why study abroad programs are a difference maker

for college students (Welch, 2017). Welch indicated students associated with these programs enjoyed four-year graduation rates that were 18% higher than those who did not participate in these programs. In addition, she cited a study that indicated that 75% of companies surveyed said study abroad is important for both entry-level staff members and management. Combined, the benefits outlined here help future industry professionals navigate an increasingly globalized sport industry.

Beyond student learning, there is also an economic benefit provided to host countries by students studying abroad. During the 2016-2017 academic year, international students contributed \$28 billion to the Australian economy (Farago, 2018). Similarly, Spain sees billions of dollars contributed to their economy by international students studying in there (Grasset & Menendez, 2018). In addition to the money students spend on their education, they are also buying food and clothing, which adds to the economies of host nations (Farago, 2018). The U.S. economy generated \$45 billion from international students in 2018 ("Economic Impact," 2019). Unfortunately, this was one of the many benefits that was lost during the COVID-19 pandemic.

For students to derive the potential benefits of a study abroad program, experiential learning should be the basis of the program. Experiential learning requires experience and reflection (Joplin, 1995; VeLure Roholt & Fisher, 2013). It is a cyclical process that builds on earlier stages in the later stages. There are four stages to the cycle generally involved in experiential learning: experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Effective study abroad programs involve

experiential learning (Lutterman-Aguilar & Gingerich, 2002) and using experiential learning techniques as a guide to designing study abroad experiences can lead to transformative learning (Strange & Gibson, 2017).

Transformative learning theory posits that through active learning, being placed in uncomfortable situations, and reflection, students are better able to develop their understanding of the world—which in turn allows for a change in their perspective (Mezirow, 1991; Strange & Gibson, 2017). This change in perspective or frame of reference is when learning occurs (Mezirow, 1997) and, in the context of studying abroad, promotes broader cultural understanding. Studying abroad offers students a natural setting in which they can encounter new cultures allowing for active learning, uncomfortable situations, and reflection. For study abroad programs to be most effective, the goal should be to involve transformative learning (Tarrant, 2010) and the best way to accomplish transformative learning is by including the necessary tenets in a program based on experiential learning where students are placed outside their respective comfort zones and encounter novel situations (Strange & Gibson, 2017; Tarrant, 2010).

The key to both experiential learning and transformative learning is reflection (Joplin, 1995; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Mezirow, 1997). For optimal learning, students should be provided both the time and proper guidance for reflecting on their experiences. The reflection portion of the learning process allows students to reconcile the differences between what they knew prior to their experience and what they have come to know during the experience.

As early as February 6, 2020, colleges and universities in the United States began canceling study abroad programs in reaction to growing concerns regarding the outbreak of COVID-19 in China (Melia & Franko, 2020). Less than a month later, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued guidance to colleges and universities that asked them to consider canceling exchange programs and asking students to return to their home countries (Redden, 2020). Throughout the rest of the month of March, colleges and universities continued to ask study abroad participants to return home or to stay on campus rather than beginning a new study abroad experience. The sudden nature of these cancellations and return-to-home orders led to uncertainty. Many students were unable to complete their study abroad experiences (Moody, 2020).

3. Method

The authors examined the predominant study abroad and international exchange practices in the sport management higher education field to understand the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic created. They also consulted literature related to study abroad, experiential learning, transformational learning, and sport management. The goal was, after investigating and analyzing this phenomenon, to create suggested policies and approaches that would allow departments to preserve or replicate the variety of benefits associated with abroad and international exchanges programs while minimizing barriers, such as cost, distance, a lack of time, or health and safety concerns. Thus, this practical goal would significantly benefit a variety of stakeholders within the sport management

community. With this goal in mind, the following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: What can the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to higher education teach the sport management community to ensure students are able to engage in experiential and transformative learning?

RQ2: What strategies can institutions of higher education implement to provide students with continued opportunities to benefit from the types of engagements traditionally associated with international programming?

The next section of this essay will provide recommendations for continuing the learning experience for students in situations in which traditional study abroad experiences are ended abruptly, delayed, or not feasible.

4. Recommendations

The lingering COVID-19 pandemic is proof that a global pandemic is no longer unprecedented and therefore must be accounted for in future planning. In addition, similar sudden phenomena could render international travel inadvisable for study abroad programs. Sport management faculty must be prepared for possible interruptions in study abroad experiences and have contingency plans in place to ensure students are able to engage in experiential and transformative learning. To that end, we recommend three courses of action that can be implemented individually or in combination, if study abroad programs are canceled or interrupted: prearranged partnerships with international faculty, faculty-led reflection, and shorter-term study abroad periods.

Although international partnerships of various

breadths and depths already exist in sport management (Colles & Alderman, 2020), we are suggesting a specific type of partnership developed especially for supplanting a study abroad interruption. This partnership would involve linking with a sport management program in another country and developing experiential learning opportunities that could be accomplished virtually—similar to the principles involved in Collaborative Online International Learning (Nava-Aguire et al., 2019) or building a global classroom (Swartz et al., 2019). If students were required to go back to their home countries before the end of their study abroad experience, the virtual partnership would be activated and students from both institutions would receive instruction from the faculty from the opposite department. For example, if the Ohio State University sport management department partnered with a sport management department at the University of Barcelona, Ohio State faculty could develop case studies related to intercollegiate athletics that Spanish students would work on, while the Spanish sport management faculty could develop case studies related to La Liga for the American students. The Ohio State student and Barcelona professor could utilize technologies like Zoom or Skype to discuss case study feedback which would enrich the experience beyond providing only standard written feedback. The interactions between professors and students could be synchronous or asynchronous depending on the locations of the universities involved.

Another component that could be included in the partnership is students from both universities using collaborative software such as Google Drive and Microsoft Teams to facilitate group work on

projects or discussions. One way in which this could be accomplished is to have teams comprised of students from both universities that are responsible for both projects. This would allow for further cross-cultural learning whereby students would be aided in their understanding of the foreign-based project by students from that country. Discussions that are properly facilitated by the professors can help maximize the benefit of working with people from other cultures (Deloach, et al., 2003).

Professional guest speakers from a variety of professions could also be utilized, in addition to professor and student interactions, to help facilitate the international experience. Hearing from industry professionals from other countries would help to mitigate the loss of the in-country experience by further exposing students to people and ideas from other cultures. These could also be done asynchronously, if necessary, by having students submit questions ahead of time and having the presentation recorded and viewed later. These experiences would not completely replace a traditional study abroad experience. However, continuing to work with faculty and students from another country would certainly contribute to a student's ability to interact with a culture outside of their own, which would contribute to a transformative learning opportunity (Tarrant, 2010).

The second recommendation for continuing student learning after an interruption of a study abroad program is faculty facilitation of reflection in an organized and structured manner. One of the necessary components for effective experiential learning and transformative learning is reflection (Joplin, 1995; Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Mezirow,

1997). Reflection is what allows a learner to adjust their beliefs based on the experiences upon which they are reflecting (Mezirow, 1990). If a study abroad experience is interrupted, as opposed to canceled outright, it is possible that the reflection portion of the learning experience could take place on the home campus upon returning from abroad. Critical reflection has two important dimensions that should be considered when creating the reflection opportunities for students: content and quality. The content dimension refers to what a student thinks about their experience and the quality dimension refers to how a student thinks about their experience (Hums & Hancock, 2012; Liu, 2015; Valli, 1997). By structuring reflection exercises with these two dimensions in mind, not only does it make the reflection productive for the student, but also assessable by the faculty member.

For a sport management study abroad experience, students could be asked to reflect on how one aspect of their international sport experience could be applied in their home country. This would prompt students to think about what would and would not work, along with why. For example, if a student was exposed to the relegation system used in some European soccer leagues, they could be asked to reflect on how that system may or may not work in Major League Baseball. They would need to reflect on how the cultural differences would impact the implementation of the system, as well as the perception from fans. Additionally, they could compare, and contrast revenue generation strategies related to relegation and the effect implementation would have on those strategies in the United States. This would allow students to put into perspective their experience

while also helping them to use that experience to increase their learning.

The third recommendation to combat the possibility of interrupted study abroad experiences is to design shorter-term engagements. Traditional study abroad experiences last for a full year or semester (Pavelka & Minion, 2020). However, there has been a trend of shortening the duration to make it easier for students to complete the experience within their degree schedule, spend less money, and participate in more than one opportunity (Anderson, et al., 2006; Pavelka & Minion, 2020). One concern regarding shorter-term study abroad experiences is whether students can get the intended benefits of the experience in less time, but several studies have found evidence that this concern is without merit. Choi et al. (2013) found that short-term study abroad programs proved to be an effective global education model. Perry et al. (2012) suggested that short-term study abroad programs can foster transformative learning. In looking at sport management study abroad programs specifically, LeCrom et al. (2018) found that there was not a difference in global mindedness among students after completing a short-term study abroad program when compared to those who participated in a semester-long program.

It becomes a logical suggestion to program shorter-term study abroad experiences with their effectiveness established. There is less chance of interruption if the program is designed for less time. The experience also becomes less financially burdensome, thereby removing a potential economic barrier to participation for students who could not afford a traditional study abroad while also opening the possibility of multiple short term

international study experiences for other potential participants. Additionally, there is a better chance that meaningful engagement can take place before an interruption does occur. Further, as the lines between sport, tourism, and travel continue to blur, the shorter-term study abroad program may decrease the impact to host countries' economies from departing students during a global crisis. Furthermore, innovative sport management programs may consider partnering with local tourism businesses to integrate local tourism and cultural elements into the short-term programs, even going so far as incorporating such programming into the online curricular components.

5. Conclusion

Experiential and transformative learning are keys to an effective sport management education. The recommendations above are meant to aid sport management educators in maintaining elements of both types of learning in a study abroad context through possible interruptions and cancellations. In addition to the study abroad application, elements of these recommendations can also be applied to traditional sport management domestic learning as well.

A global pandemic does not only interrupt study abroad experiences and opportunities. As we all experienced, domestic learning opportunities can also be greatly affected. The suggested recommendations can also be applied to partnerships and collaborations that take place in a program's home country. The underlying components of these recommendations, transformative and experiential learning, are certainly applicable to domestic learning and therefore it is important to also

prepare for how these components are accounted for in the case of interruption of domestic learning opportunities. These elements are also critical skills that employers throughout the world value and depend on to deliver their goods and services.

One of the common ways in which sport management programs create experiential learning opportunities for their students is to have them work special events such as the Super Bowl, all-star games, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championships, college conference championships, and other regional and community-based events. Sporting events like these were either canceled or altered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant plans for students to gain experience through their involvement with these events were impeded or lost outright. Applying some or all the recommendations above would help to mitigate this disruption. For example, if students were planning to work an event that was canceled, have the organizers speak to the class to discuss the decision-making process for canceling the event. If the event was adjusted due to a pandemic, then the organizers could discuss why they made the changes they made. It would also be beneficial to have participants of the canceled event speak to the students to share their perspectives. As part of the process, the students could then be asked to reflect on what the speakers said and how they would have handled the situation if they were in charge.

Another way to replace an in-person opportunity would be to work with the organizers of the event to create a case study competition that allows students to create a plan for an altered event (e.g. the National Basketball Association “bub-

ble”). The organizers could then judge the competition as a way to provide feedback for the students, but also create another interaction opportunity between the industry professionals and the students.

A final approach to replace in-person educational experiential learning opportunities while still providing a variety of benefits is creating a COIL, also known as a “Global Classroom” (Swartz et al., 2020). These terms refer to an approach where instructors at different academic institutions collaborate by creating a joint project of a specific duration that requires students in both classes to meaningfully interact with each other as part of fulfilling the project’s terms (Nava-Aguirre et al., 2019). Students can work individually or in teams; for group work, the instructors can also decide whether to create teams with students from both classes to force more direct comparative learning. Furthermore, the project is to be as nimble as necessary, meaning it can be of limited duration or be incorporated into the fabric of a course throughout the term. They can be scaled based on the needs of the course, as well as relevant internal and external factors. The project has the potential to create an opportunity for students to serve as consultants for a professional sports team or to work on a compelling case study project, among other topics. Therefore, COILs can provide a diversity of benefits.

We cannot lose the exposure of American sport management programs to international sport partnerships that benefit students who wish to open themselves to an international sport career. Further, students need to understand the fact that sport is both global and will become more global in the

future. For example, the NFL is considering a 4-team European division (Chavkin, 2022), and Major League Baseball, Major League Soccer, the National Basketball Association, and the National Hockey League already include international teams. The English Premier League and other European soccer leagues are increasingly popular in the United States (Zuhosky, 2022). Programs like the NYU Master's in Sport program boasts of connections it has made for its students with Chelsea FC, Club Tiges (Mexico), FC Bayern Munchen, and Japan Sport Association (Master's, n.d). Other programs form partnerships with international programs to send students abroad for a semester of international learning.

If sport management faculty take into consideration the suggestions from above when designing study abroad programs, we believe it will increase the chances that students will be able to engage in experiential and transformative learning even if a global pandemic type of event interrupts or cancels study abroad experiences. Additionally, these same principles can be applied to domestic learning strategies to mitigate the impact of a global event on these experiences as well.

Now that we have experienced COVID-19 and the ramifications of trying to mitigate its spread, we must be prepared to provide our students with learning opportunities despite the hurdles that are sure to present themselves. By developing partnerships, creating reflection opportunities, and designing shorter-term programs, sport management faculty can take a step toward not letting another COVID-19 completely disrupt our mission of producing students capable of succeeding in an ever-increasing global sport industry.

6. Future Areas of Study

A future area of study would be to investigate emerging technologies to see if there is a way to mimic the study abroad experience without having to travel. Things like virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence and the metaverse all offer the possibility of experiencing the world in a way that potentially requires fewer resources, but mimics current study abroad experiences. The researchers are also considering investigating the potential value of combining the above-mentioned emerging technology with popular best practices for simulating international cultural exchange as a COIL. Another area of future research could center on predicting future global events that could impede student learning, whether it is abroad or domestically. An expansion of this area of research could also develop contingencies based on the types of global events predicted.

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