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Opinion

True partnership takes sport management out of classroom

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**NELS
POPP**

Last spring, the Big Ten asked us whether we would put together a short presentation for its athletic marketing meeting. The topic: How can Big Ten athletic marketers more effectively partner with their universities' sport management programs?

This request highlights a disconnect occurring far too often between sport management academicians and practitioners. While sport management programs have sprouted up on hundreds of college campuses, too many athletic departments and other sport organizations have been slow to fully embrace them. At the same time, many academic programs have not done nearly enough to cultivate a strong relationship with those same entities. This partnership needs to go beyond faculty simply encouraging students to apply for internships or requesting guest speakers from the school's athletic department. Below, we offer some suggestions on how both sides can gain from better partnerships.



**CHAD
McEVOY**

Better student labor

Many athletic departments and professional sports teams rely on sport management student interns. The quality of interns varies considerably, however, and sometimes sport organizations can be stuck with a bad fit. This issue could often be avoided if a strong relationship is forged between industry administrators and sport management faculty. Sport management professors often know which students are strong in certain areas or are the hardest workers, yet too often faculty are not consulted during internship selection. If a relationship is in place, the professor has more at stake and will not want to endorse a deficient fit as it will reflect poorly on the program and could hurt the partnership. Also, when that relationship is strong, faculty members can help an athletic department or other organization quickly fill a need when another intern decides to take a job elsewhere or a full-time employee earns a promotion.

When schools offer a graduate sport management program, we strongly advocate local sport organizations utilizing graduate assistants. While interns may have a cheaper price tag, the GA can be a better long-term investment. Reliance on the semester-long internship model has inherent flaws — students leaving just as they get the routine down, supervisors retraining staff several times a year, or students providing minimal effort after the requirements of their internship are complete. The GA often enters a position with industry experience, is prepared for a longer commitment, and is often more career focused.

At Illinois State, we are fortunate to have a GA program in which the athletic department and local minor league teams can elect to fund stipends for graduate students. In exchange, sport organizations get the services of a graduate student for up to two years, the length of our curriculum. Sport management graduate assistantship programs have proved quite successful at schools like North Carolina and Ohio.

Student sales teams

Selling tickets is another area where sport management programs can team up with university athletic departments or minor league teams. At UMass, sport management students have had tremendous success selling Minutemen hockey games, and at Marist, a sport marketing class sold out a women's basketball game without discounting tickets. For years, sport sales classes at Memphis, Mount Union, Ball State and Metro State have been making cold calls and closing sales for local professional teams.

While a sport management program can certainly help a marketer sell a single event, it may be unreasonable to expect students to deliver long-term sales results. In fact, the first time a class starts making cold calls, the results can be underwhelming. Perhaps the more realistic and beneficial goal for athletic marketers is to use the class to mine for prospects and generate leads, producing results beyond the conclusion of the course.

If a sport management program does not offer a sales-specific course, it would be worth a sport marketer's time to discuss adding such a course with the department chair, as more and more sport management grads are turning to sales for entry into the industry.

Affordable research

Another way sport management programs can help sport marketers is through collaborative research projects. Many marketers in college athletics or minor leagues would love to have more information about their fans and sponsors, but they lack the time and personnel to conduct consumer research or to analyze ticket prices or attendance trends in any sophisticated manner. Many sport management faculty, however, have strong backgrounds in survey design and statistical analysis. Meanwhile, students can provide valuable labor to help administer surveys and input data, while also building their résumés.

After collecting data, students and faculty could then pore over the results to develop marketing recommendations and produce reports that could be used to supplement sponsorship pieces or drive new marketing initiatives. For example, here at Illinois State, students and three faculty members recently teamed up with the Missouri Valley Conference to conduct sponsor recognition surveys at league basketball games. Similar projects have taken place at the University of Louisville with the Louisville Bats and Mississippi State with the Viking Classic PGA Tour event.

While these examples represent a few ways sport management academic programs can partner with practitioners, many other possibilities exist. Other examples of partnerships include students conducting customer service secret shopper exercises (Memphis), running successful fundraising events (UMass, Louisville), and participating in community service outreach programs (Central Florida). Whatever the case, all parties could certainly benefit from narrowing the gap between academics and practitioners. There is too much to gain to not work together more closely.

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