

Engaging Students as Stakeholders through a Student Advisory Board

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Abstract:

The use of advisory boards in higher education has long served as a means for colleges, universities and academic units to gain support and guidance. Sport management is no stranger to this practice as the dynamic nature of the industry requires a concerted effort by academicians to improve program offerings. With this goal in mind, the paper outlines the use of students as stakeholders in their learning process through the formation of a student advisory board in sport management. This advisory board would work together with academic faculty and administration in a similar capacity as would an industry advisory board. The board would serve as a means of providing feedback on curriculum development, networking opportunities, effective teaching modalities, industry trends and other programming facets. Student advisory boards in sport management education is an application of the foundation established in the area of library sciences and from practitioner advisory boards in business and other sectors. Implementation of such an endeavor requires buy-in from faculty and administration to incorporate student voice in the educational process. The paper includes further discussion in relation to student advisory board establishment, role, membership and benefits.

Keywords: sport management education, advisory boards, engagement, student stakeholders

Advisory boards are widely used (in industry and academia) to gain insight and guidance on best practices from a diverse group of stakeholders. This concept has gained considerable traction in higher education as industry professionals have long served as a means for colleges, universities and academic units to gain support and guidance on preparing graduates for entry into the workforce (e.g., Genheimer & Shehab, 2009; Nagai & Nehls, 2014; Rapert, 2017; Rose & Stiefer, 2013; Söderlund, Spartz, & Weber, 2017; Zahra, Newey, & Shaver, 2011). The academic discipline of sport management has also extensively utilized this key stakeholder group (practitioners) to form advisory boards for the purpose of curriculum development, internship and job placement and other strategic and programmatic matters (Hicks, Hancher-Rauch, VanSickle, & Satterblom, 2011; Kane & Jisha, 2004; Lawrence et al., 2018; Milman, 2017). This notion has been further extended to other areas of the sport industry that utilize stakeholder involvement in decision making processes such as the inclusion of high performance athletes in national governing body planning (Geeraert, Alm, & Groll, 2013; Thibault, Kihl, & Babiak, 2010), the use of student athletes in the formation of intercollegiate athletic policy (Kihl & Schull, 2019), fan participation in team decision making (Uhrich, 2020) and local organizing committee involvement in the governance of major sporting events (Parent, 2016).

Applying these sport industry stakeholder involvement tactics, we shift our attention to the constantly evolving role of higher education stakeholders in sport management academia. As the landscape in higher education changes, students have been thrust into becoming stakeholders in their own learning. This 'student-as-stakeholder' concept (Seale, 2009) is an area that has received insufficient attention as it pertains to sport management academic programs. To remain relevant, sport management academic programs must be driven by the dynamic nature of the sport industry and the needs of practitioners in the field. As such, new industry trends and policies warrant the inclusion of students to aide in the development of learning strategies. Furthermore, students can realize their critical stakeholder status through actively engaging in the design, creation and production of their own learning.

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Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to advance the 'student-as-stakeholder' concept through the formation and implementation of a sport management student advisory board (hereafter SM-SAB). The SM-SAB would work together with academic faculty and administration in a similar capacity as would an industry advisory board. Evidence for the benefits of such a program is drawn from both the higher education (Astin, 1984; Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009) and sport management (Hicks et al., 2011; Jisha & Kane, 2004) literature. The formalization of student-stakeholders comprising a SM-SAB is a departure from traditional student major clubs and other extracurricular activities that serve to engage students (Brown & Johnson, 2018; Kornspan & Duve, 2013). Suggestions for creating and utilizing a SM-SAB are outlined in this paper as well as the potential outcomes related to further engaging students in their learning process.

Engagement in Higher Education

Student participation in their own learning came to the forefront of higher education research in the 1980s with Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement. Other scholars (e.g., Krause & Coates, 2008; Kuh, 2009) have similarly suggested that participating in educational activities outside of the classroom can provide desirable outcomes for both the student and the institution. The main premise here is that the more involved students are in the academic and social aspects of their institution, the more they will benefit from a learning and personal development perspective. Literature in this area aligns with the call for students to move beyond serving as mere consultants in the development of their own learning but to become intimately engaged in the design, production and creation of curriculum (Bovill & Bulley, 2011).

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement comprises the degree of physical and psychological effort required on the part of students towards their academic experience. It is noteworthy that according to Astin, one of the defining attributes of a highly involved student is their frequent interaction with faculty. Student involvement theory outlines the impact of these frequent interactions on student satisfaction with various aspects of the institution including course selection and the intellectual environment. Another critical area within higher education research that aligns with the proposed benefits of a SM-SAB, is Kuh's (2009) concept of student engagement. Kuh (p. 683) defines engagement not only as the time and effort a student devotes to achieve desirable outcomes, but also what the institution does to "induce" student participation in certain activities. The institution, in this sense, is responsible for creating a framework that facilitates student engagement. Coates (2007) and Krause and Coates (2008) also found engagement as a means of embracing academic and non-academic facets of an institution for overall success of the student experience. The literature in this area of higher education research, in terms of frequent faculty interaction and inducing students to become involved and engaged in their educational and student experience, provides support for implementing a SM-SAB.

Matthews (2016) suggests that engaging students and faculty in discussions on curriculum decisions and other programmatic issues provides a greater understanding of student learning. The link this creates can go beyond informal consultations and toward a co-creator relationship or partnership. Healey, Flint and Harrington (2014, p. 7) describe this heightened level of engagement between academics and students as 'a way of doing things' rather than a result of how things are done. This focus places an emphasis on a process and value orientation rather than what has been traditionally seen in the student engagement space as an outcome orientation. In a similar vein, Matthews, Dwyer, Russell and Enright (2019) conducted interviews of institutional leaders and found high praise for the inclusion of student voice in higher education. These institutional leaders deemed the 'students as partners' structure beneficial for the entire institution. Eventually, the discussions veered toward the ability of an institution to remain relevant to their stakeholders (mainly students) while avoiding the neoliberal propensity of higher education (Matthews, et al., 2019, p. 2201). While there has been increased interest in this area within higher education (Bell et al., 2019; Chilvers, Fox, & Bennett, 2019; Ryan, 2019), the process is not without its challenges.

Within other areas of higher education, such as health care and library sciences, there has been distinctive use of student involvement in the educational process. In nursing education, Bate and Robert (2007) indicate that the goal should be to make students the focal point of the design process. Since nursing education is an area that relies heavily on relevance to industry practice (similar to sport management), student involvement can have tremendous value. Despite the intent and realization of the importance of student involvement in nursing education, Haralseth, Friberg and Aase (2016) found that the academic side has yet to embrace the student stakeholder model. From a different perspective, library sciences is an area within higher education that has engaged student stakeholders and employed the use of student advisory boards. Research in the area of library

sciences (e.g., Deuink & Seiler, 2006, 2009; Doshi, Scharf, & Fox, 2016) found student advisory boards to be highly effective and unique tools for engagement and assessment.

While there is considerable research on student advisory boards in the field of library sciences, Dorney (2013) emphasized that there continues to be a lack of specific follow-up or translating feedback into tangible change and improvement. This issue is not unique to programming in higher education and for an advisory board (practitioner or student) to be successful there must be a concerted effort on the part of the relevant stakeholders to conduct timely evaluation and assessment.

Engagement in Sport Management Education

From an engagement perspective, sport management academic programs have used various modes to achieve desirable outcomes (e.g., internships, experiential and service learning, work integrated learning, practitioner advisory boards). Other research has also built upon the academic-industry collaborations that take place in sport management (e.g., Pack, 2019; Sokolowski, 2019; Zaharia & Kaburakis, 2016). Regarding internships and experiential and service learning, a wealth of literature can be found pertaining to specific connections to satisfaction, commitment and retention (Alfaro-Barrantes, Jacobs, & Wendry, 2020; Brown, Willett, Goldfine, & Goldfine, 2018; DeLuca & Braunstein-Minkove, 2016; Foster & Dollar, 2010; Sauder & Mudrick, 2018; Koo, Diacin, Khojasteh, & Dixon, 2016). An internship is often a required element of sport management programs and Eagleman and McNary (2010) found that over two-thirds (77.5%) of programs had such a requirement. Similarly, the Commission of Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) stipulates various aspects of practical and experiential learning within program curriculum as a requirement for accreditation.

Another means of industry engagement is through an advisory board comprised mainly of industry practitioners. Kane and Jisha (2004) praise the benefits of such advisory boards for enhancing sport management student engagement and industry involvement. Hicks et al. (2011) also found that the formation of advisory boards can be seen as a move to add both credibility and value to academic programs. Lawrence et al. (2018) outlined the various advantages of engagement activities for sport management program advisory boards. Of those institutions surveyed, a select few (8.6%) indicated that students were also included in the makeup of their advisory boards which lends credence to formalizing a SM-SAB (Lawrence et al. 2018).

The aforementioned areas of pedagogy mainly involve opportunities outside of the sport management classroom. From within the classroom, some of the various instructional approaches used to engage students include case studies (Snelgrove, Wood, & Wigfield, 2020), debates (Schreffler, 2020), flipped classrooms (Killian & Woods, 2018; Lumpkin & Achen, 2015), blended learning (Lower-Hoppe, Wanless, Aldridge, & Jones, 2019), and value-centric teaching (Lyberger, 2020). In the area of curriculum redesign, Nixon and Williams (2014) utilized students to redesign a sport business course module and students self-reported deeper levels of learning and enhancement of employability skills. Among these pedagogical approaches, the onus is on the student to engage in the creation of their own learning and for faculty to involve students in that process. Several early studies in the sport management curricular landscape (DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990; Parkhouse, 1987; Parks & Quain, 1986; Ulrich & Parkhouse, 1982) suggest the inclusion of student voice to further achieve academic relevance. Despite these early assertions by some of the pioneers in sport management pedagogy, the incorporation of students as relevant stakeholders in curriculum design and other functions has not received the attention it deserves.

The motivation behind this study is to outline the creation of a SM-SAB as a means of facilitating students as stakeholders in their own learning. Students within a sport management academic program can be an excellent group to elicit input on various topics including curriculum development, networking opportunities, effective teaching modalities, industry trends and other programming facets. As such, a well-designed and supported SM-SAB can function in a wide array of capacities and serve as an excellent tool for recruitment, retention and assessment. Student participation in an advisory board is structured around creating new learning experiences designed to expand programs and better prepare them for the sport industry marketplace.

Sport Management Student Advisory Board (SM-SAB)

The SM-SAB is an application of the foundation established in the area of library sciences and from practitioner advisory boards utilized in sport management and other academic disciplines. The implementation of such an endeavor requires buy-in from faculty and administration to incorporate student voice in the educational process. Schaeffer and Rouse (2014) found that a critical role of any advisory board is to limit an academic unit from operating in a vacuum and thus being out of touch with students and the industry they intend to enter.

The following sections include further discussion on a SM-SAB in relation to its establishment, role, membership and benefits.

Establishment and Role

The SM-SAB is something that should be unique and individualized to a particular institution and based on the goals and objectives of the sport management academic unit. With that being said, the decision to establish a SM-SAB relies heavily on the value faculty and administrators place on student voice. Scharf, Doshi and Fox (2015) found that libraries establish student advisory boards to achieve a number of objectives related to the students they serve including an efficiency in making connections. While the establishment of a SM-SAB may be facilitated by faculty and administration, an engaged student body may also initiate such an endeavor. When the latter is the case, faculty and administration must be open and objective to harnessing student motivation and drive to form an advisory board.

In line with Mello (2019), a critical first step in the process is to articulate the purpose of the board prior to its formation and seemingly before member recruitment can take place. Moreover, there should be a connection between the intended purpose of the SM-SAB and the goals and objectives of the sport management program. For instance, the sport management academic unit may desire to develop course offerings in the areas of electronic sports and gaming. It would then be pertinent to bounce these ideas off an engaged group of stakeholders from within the academic program that have an interest in electronic sports and gaming. Assessment of curricular needs and adjustments that align with industry trends and student desires is paramount to the establishment and role of the SM-SAB. Tuhkala, Ekonoja and Hämäläinen (2020) found that involvement of students in certain functions (e.g., curriculum design) is a delicate process. Beyond curricular guidance, the SM-SAB may share collective experiences and insight on the sport industry from internships and additional experiential learning opportunities. Other roles might be to suggest valuable guest speaker or to facilitate networking opportunities and potential site visits. Faculty and administration that advise the SM-SAB must make clear that while not all suggestions can be implemented, each member's voice is critical.

The SM-SAB serves as a conduit between students and their sport management academic program. A significant role of the SM-SAB is to enhance learning experiences and advance employability. In the process, students will engage in team-building and leadership skills. Students can also become familiar with protocols and procedures of organizations and form best practices for becoming change agents.

Membership

Similar to other on-campus groups, organizations and clubs, membership in a student advisory board must adhere to the tenets of inclusion, representation and diversity. Regarding SM-SAB membership, relevant sport management faculty and administrators may choose any of the following methods or combination thereof: selection (appointment), nomination and election. With student selection or appointment, faculty and administrators must remain cognizant of bias and appropriate representation in certain areas including but not limited to diversity, year in college and intended career path within the sport industry. The solicitation of faculty nominations may be another way of obtaining a diverse group of student members (Kerka, 2002). This method allows for a broader reach of both full-time and adjunct faculty members teaching in the program. Administration may also turn to their professional advisory board membership to review applications and resumes of potential members in the SM-SAB. Election of members is a method that may require an emphasis on rules and regulations and the existence of SM-SAB by-laws and a constitution. The degree to which the faculty and administration determine the formalization of the SM-SAB will direct this decision. A combination of any of the above mentioned methods might suit a broader range of programs in terms of enrollment, specification, existence of a majors club and other potential variables. Subsequent membership in the SM-SAB may be driven by the ability of existing members to recruit their peers. Another area to consider is word of mouth recruitment determined by the notoriety of SM-SAB decisions and events. As the SM-SAB grows in stature and gains popularity within the sport management program, the hope is that students will potentially seek out membership and involvement.

Benefits

As previously mentioned, the SM-SAB is a means of facilitating students as stakeholders in their own learning. Students assist the academic program to better achieve its mission and goals and in turn provide various resources. For example, a sport management program that allows students to share in the decision making process regarding curriculum, among other things, will ensure a student-centered approach to teaching and learning.

Perceived benefits of a SM-SAB are consistent with the work of Healey et al. (2014) in that it creates a transformative practice that challenges the hierarchy of the traditional student-faculty and student-institution relationships. Matthews et al. (2019) also found potential in these endeavors to provide feedback and engagement that enhances student satisfaction and relevance. In this way, the SM-SAB may serve as a marketing tool for recruitment and have an impact on student persistence and retention.

Programs with a SM-SAB also have the ability to administer successful assessment tools with direct information from students. This allows for greater analysis, flexibility for change and ease of implementation. Members of the SM-SAB may communicate a desire for their program to seek out accreditation (e.g., COSMA) or other internal and external reviews. Other benefits include a greater understanding of employability (by both students and academics) which may result in closing the gap between career expectation and reality (Barnes, 2014). Through their engagement in the SM-SAB, students may be more inclined to become advocates on campus for their major, industry and institution at large. This is particularly true if membership is inclusive of underrepresented groups within the program.

The outcomes and benefits of a SM-SAB pay dividends in many different areas and the relationship enhances a student-centric sport management program. To this end, the SM-SAB allows for capacity building in shared decision-making and for information to be viewed through a fresh, diverse lens.

Conclusion

With increased competition in the sport industry job market and changes to higher education including the rising costs of tuition, it is imperative that students maximize their involvement and participation in their educational process. Advisory boards made up of sport industry professionals have long served a specific, consultative purpose in higher education. On the other hand, the SM-SAB is a non-traditional means of developing a viable learning and assessment tool that benefits the primary institutional stakeholders (students, faculty and administrators). Sport management academic programs lean on industry professionals as an outlet to the sport industry for job placement and assessment of relevant trends for curricular advisement. Likewise, the SM-SAB serves as a real-time means of assessing the state of the program from the student perspective. The opportunities to be gained through a SM-SAB are promising as academic demands on students are ever-changing and there is tremendous potential in the areas of student creativity, confidence and enthusiasm (Rapert, 2017).

Establishing a SM-SAB follows Kuh's (2009) emphasis on continuous improvement of student engagement through high-impact practices. An effective SM-SAB can truly impact student learning. Engaging students as stakeholders in their learning process leads to outcomes more applicable to their needs within the sport industry (Concannon et al., 2012). An area that often plagues sport management academia is what Barnes (2014) and others (Hancock & Greenwell, 2013; Schwab et al., 2013) term the divide between student motivations for majoring in sport management and comprehension of viable sport industry career opportunities. Since a SM-SAB can help to ease this predicament and serve as a means of peer mentoring and learning. Furthermore, the SM-SAB creates a platform for student voice outside the confines of the classroom and among peers. These examples of innovative engagement between sport management programs and the SM-SAB are also shared to provide actionable items for faculty to implement and use at their institution for improved learning and future assessment.

Future Research

Based on the recommendations for establishing a SM-SAB, further research is necessary in regards to implementation and subsequent follow-up. The existence and benefits of a SM-SAB must be explored in depth to glean the potential benefits outlined in this paper. From this research, more information can be provided on best practices, outcomes and feedback. It should be noted that academic programs often include alumni among their practitioner advisory board members so there is potential for long-term connections to be developed and assessed. Another critical area is the discussion on how SM-SAB feedback is communicated and subsequently implemented. Also, this paper did not fully address the potential differences between an undergraduate and graduate SM-SAB. Program administrators must consider the varying needs of both groups and the potential differences that exist. By fully understanding these relationships and the information flow, faculty and students can move beyond the immediate needs while still within the confines of the institution and into the sport industry.

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