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Findings in Sport, Hospitality, Entertainment, and Event Management

Empirical – Sport

Rally with the Rapids: An Experiential Learning Project with Special Olympic Athletes

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Abstract

Students who have participated in an experiential learning project are better prepared and have a superior internship because of the experience. Furthermore, students can increase their diversity-related competencies by developing interpersonal skills through exposure to diverse cultural identities. Guided by intergroup contact theory, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of an experiential learning project for a Special Olympics basketball event on undergraduate sport management student's development of diversity-related

competencies. Participants included eight undergraduate sport management students from a Midwestern university who participated in the project as part of a sport management curriculum. Retrospective interviews were conducted with the participants to explore their understanding and acceptance of the Special Olympics movement and recommendations for future course projects. Thematic analysis was employed and the results concluded that experiential learning was a productive and effective way to build diversity-related competencies with undergraduate sport management students. Facilitated intergroup contact among sport management professionals can provide opportunities for developing diversity-related competencies, reducing biases, and growing sports and physical activity for individuals with intellectual, cognitive, emotional, or physical disabilities. Future research may benefit from longitudinally assessing student's prior knowledge, attitudes and prejudices regarding intellectual disability across time.

Keywords: Experiential Learning, Student Development, Special Olympics

Experiential learning is a “process through which knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kros & Watson, 2004, p. 283). From this perspective, learning occurs as an individual actively engages in a behavior (e.g., “learn by doing”) as opposed to passively receiving pre-programmed content delivered through a one-sided approach (e.g., attending a professor’s lecture, reading about content in a textbook). To create such an experience for students, one must ensure the opportunity to discover, process, apply information, and reflect on what has been done (Conley, 2008; Kolb, 1984). The literature has identified major benefits of experiential learning in the sport management discipline including the opportunity to gain practical work experience, develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and encourage professional development (Burke et al., 2013; Judge et al., 2011). Other benefits include increased collaboration among students, real-world application of knowledge in a practical context, flexibility in learning activity choices, and a place for reflection (Malouf, 2003). Graff (2012) and Judge and colleagues (2011) have also suggested experiential learning opportunities provide students with a supportive environment to learn from their mistakes.

Background

Theoretical Framework

In line with the benefits described above, experiential learning has also garnered attention regarding its potential to build diversity-related competencies among students working with diverse populations (Wozencroft et al., 2015). Diversity-related competency, or cultural competency, refers to the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures (American College Health Association, n.d.). Examples include valuing and respecting individual differences, fostering an inclusive environment, perspective taking from others point of view, and including and engaging others who have interests, skills, or experiences different from one’s own. Research suggests diversity-related competencies may be met through well-designed experiential learning initiatives that facilitate transformation of student perspectives by expanding their social networks through engagement with individuals from demographics with whom they might not ordinarily interact (Clayton & Ash, 2004; Muscott, 2000). In turn, experiential learning may encourage openness toward diverse populations (Lundy, 2007). For example, Li and Wu (2012) studied Special Olympics

volunteers’ attitudes regarding individuals with intellectual disabilities and found that volunteers possessed more favorable attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities after working with the athletes at these Games. Similarly, Rice (2009) found students enrolled in a special education course, or those exposed to topics of disability in class, held more positive attitudes toward people with disabilities than those students who were not exposed to disabilities in the classroom. Previous research has supported these findings suggesting the more direct contact a person has, the more positive his or her attitudes are toward individuals with disabilities (Perry et al., 2008; Scior, 2011).

The current study suggests experiential learning may be a valuable tool to develop students’ diversity-related competencies and promote greater understanding, change of attitudes, and reduction of bias and prejudice regarding individuals with a disability, namely, within the context of the Special Olympics. Accordingly, a theory that has been widely accepted to promote social change and thus deemed appropriate to guide the current project is intergroup contact theory (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). Originally stemming from Allport’s (1954) intergroup contact hypothesis, this theory posits that intergroup contact under appropriate conditions can effectively reduce prejudice between majority and minority group members. Specifically, prejudice reduction may occur when members of different groups meet on an equal status footing to pursue common goals through cooperative interaction, in such a way as to allow the development of close relationships with members of the out-group.

When considering the role of experiential learning to promote understanding and development of diversity-related competencies among students, it is critical that such experiences are crafted in a way that will lead to cooperative and interdependent interactions in pursuit of common goals, consequently shifting students to re-categorize themselves from “us and them” to “we” (Desforges et al., 1991; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1999). Importantly, during this experience, hands-on learning must relate to a strong instructional classroom element to educate and develop students’ diversity-related competencies. Taken together, the current study argues that students’ diversity-related competencies may be enhanced if the classroom instruction and hands-on portion of the experiential learning activity creates successful intergroup contact between the students and individuals participating in the Special Olympics.



The Experiential Learning Project.

The assignment was for undergraduate sport management students to collaboratively host and produce a sporting event that had the same energy, passion, excitement, attention to detail, and entertainment value as a collegiate or professional basketball game. The two competing teams of the game were Special Olympics athletes from Grand Rapids (MI) and Big Rapids (MI). The name “Rally with the Rapids” is meant to symbolize coming together and rallying for SO.

Students were introduced to SO the second day of class through videos, testimonies, and storytelling. The third day of class, Special Olympians visited the class with their medals and memories of why their experiences were so important to them. One athlete, a female Special Olympics Global Messenger, told the class, “I would be nothing without Special Olympics. It’s everything to me.” In addition to explaining the importance, the athletes told the class what they wanted in the event. Topics discussed included a meet and greet with students, halftime entertainment, the type of music they would prefer, etc. On the fourth day of class, students who were interested in running for a chair position gave a short presentation as to why they were best suited for the role (see Figure 1). That same day, students were required to indicate the areas of event management they would most like to participate in for the project. The professor (third author) and the leadership team then assigned roles based on preferences, skills, and personalities.

Revenue generation was taught soon thereafter emphasizing the importance of the project and the sport management industry as whole. All students were required to sell sponsorships, so sales were discussed weekly with relatable current industry practices, current literature, and updates from individual students. Over the next few weeks, core concepts in event conceptualization, budgeting, media relations, risk management, staffing, event logistics, etc. were theoretically taught while drawing inferences to the event. Southhall et al. (2003) suggested that because the instructor is playing the role of practitioner in such a model, the more in-depth nature of the relationship provides greater knowledge acquisition by the student. Students worked mostly out of class within their groups on the project but received time every week to give updates, assign work, and organize.

Special Olympics Movement.

Special Olympics (SO) is a global organization dedicated to providing sport and physical activity opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities, impacting more than six million athletes and one million coaches and volunteers annually

worldwide (Special Olympics, 2020). Additionally, SO provides programming through its Young Athletes Program (ages 2-7), Unified, School, and local, regional, national and international competitions. SO provides a critical platform for health, wellness, and inclusion among individuals with intellectual disabilities, which are caused by genetic conditions, complications during pregnancy, problems during birth, and diseases or toxic exposure (American Association of Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 2020).

Previous studies in the context of the SO have examined athlete participation outcomes, coaching perspectives, and the impact of SO on the family-unit. For example, in a systematic review of the literature, Tint and colleagues (2017) included 46 studies related to physical and psychosocial correlates of SO participation. Many of these studies focused on the positive psychological and emotional development of athletes, including self-worth, social skills, cognitive competence, and overall happiness. Moreover, while several studies have included SO participants, few have explored the impacts of an experiential learning project, both on the participants and the students completing the project. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the impact of an experiential learning project on undergraduate sport management students' development of diversity-related competencies.

Method

Upon completion of the experiential learning project, the second author conducted semi-structured interviews and course project assessments with eight undergraduate sport management students ($N = 3$ female; $N = 5$ male) involved with the project. These interviews were retrospective in nature and continued until saturation and richness occurred. The post-event interviews with the sport management students addressed the following areas: 1) assess the students understanding and acceptance of athletes with disabilities, 2) examine if and how hosting this event may have changed attitudes towards Special Olympics athletes, 3) explore possible reductions in biases, prejudices, or naiveté based on the course project, and 4) explore if and how students may choose to remain or get involved with Special Olympics and similar movements in both their professional and personal lives in the future.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of a semester-long experiential learning project for a Special Olympics basketball event on undergraduate sport management students' development of diversity-related competencies. Findings were overwhelmingly positive and affirmed the critical nature of experiential learning projects and their influence on all stakeholders involved. Several key themes emerged from the student interviews including prior experience with SO athletes, understanding and acceptance of SO athletes, prior prejudices and biases, change in attitudes related to individuals with intellectual disabilities, future involvement in SO or similar movements, and recommendations for the course project. These themes and pertinent quotes are presented in the next section and a breakdown of the content analysis can be found in Table 1 (end of article).

Prior Experience with Special Olympics or Adapted Physical Activity

Overall, six student participants had prior experiences with Special Olympics, adapted physical activity, or special education programs. These students had mostly been exposed during their high school athletic teams, academic coursework, or extracurricular activities. One student reported no previous experiences with these sport and physical activity programs, while one student did not directly report their previous involvement. All six of the participants with previous experience noted that the event impacted their further understanding, acceptance and attitudes towards Special Olympics athletes, even with prior participation in similar activities. Additionally, one sport management student (P1) stated: "I was never presented with an opportunity to work at an event for people with intellectual disabilities (before the course)."

Understanding and Acceptance of Special Olympics Athletes

All eight student participants overwhelmingly reported positive affect and acceptance of SO athletes because of the event. Several students spoke fondly of specific athlete characteristics such as appreciation, enjoyment, selflessness, teamwork, athletic skill, and their dedication. Interestingly, two students acknowledged feeling shocked after learning more about the number of sports, length of participation, organization of practices, and games offered by the

SO. One student thought SO as more of a "leisure" activity and was really impressed with the passion and involvement of the athletes she met during the event. Additionally, several student participants remarked with great admiration and could clearly recall when two of the SO athletes visited class as guest speakers. Most students reported acceptance of Special Olympics athletes because of their participation in this event. More specifically, Participant 7 noted the level of energy the athletes had throughout the game and that the evening "felt like a cup of enjoyment overflowing into the crowd." Participant 8 exclaimed that "...it's the most rewarding event I've ever been part of...I just think they appreciated everything we did, we kept the focus on athletes and it turned out exactly how we wanted it to go."

Prior Prejudices and Biases

Student participants were visibly and audibly uncomfortable with their response to possible prior prejudices and biases held by themselves or classmates regarding SO athletes and similar movements. Two students admitted to prior prejudices and biases, with Participant 6 recalling "...yeah, I would say so, you can naturally have biases." However, two students could confidently report no negative thoughts or attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities amongst their classmates. Four participants held ambiguous views and were either cautious to report prejudices and biases, or they couldn't speak for their classmates. Participant 3 described this process: "I don't think they did intentionally, I'm sure there were students that didn't understand it and this project gave us that understanding...classmates gained a new respect for Special Olympics." Thus, the event could challenge prior attitudes and preconceptions related to SO athletes.

Change in Attitudes Related to Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities

Seven student participants revealed that they noticed changes in attitudes towards individuals with intellectual disabilities, with one student not reporting directly. Several noted the excitement surrounding the event, including tears of joy from spectators, parents, athletes, and the students hosting the event. More directly, Participant 6 described: "...they really just want to be given a chance, they don't want their focus to be on their disability, they want to be seen as people...not identified by their disability..." Furthermore, Participant 7 divulged the overall power of the event to change perceptions, stating "...yes, my attitudes definitely changed. I would hope that my classmates' views changed as well, if anything did



change their minds it would be something like this event...” When debriefed further by the interviewer, Participant 6 noted that the integration and normalization of SO athletes have made tremendous progress over the past 10-15 years, but that we still have a way to go. These views speak to the importance of direct contact and exposure to diverse and multicultural individuals and groups through athletics, using sport as a vehicle for social change.

Future Involvement in Special Olympics or Similar Movements

Seven participants detailed their plans to get involved in the future with Special Olympics or similar movements. Participant 5 noted: “...because of this event, more people would be willing to go volunteer with Special Olympics and possibly watch the Paralympics, or go support something else that they wouldn’t do previously.” Several participants relayed their intent to get involved in the future as coaches, volunteers, officials, or SO Unified programs. Participant 1, whose parents attended the event and were exposed to SO for the first time, communicated that his parents now want to get involved in the organization.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a semester-long experiential learning project for a Special Olympics basketball event on undergraduate sport management students' development of diversity-related competencies. The findings revealed that following participation in the experiential learning project, students developed a greater understanding and acceptance of SO athletes and more positive attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities. Moreover, personal experience was identified as a factor that shaped participant attitudes toward people with disabilities, supporting previous research suggesting exposure to people with disabilities and working with them leads to better attitudes toward people with disabilities (Rice, 2009; Scior, 2011). In addition, the service nature of this project and learning what the Special Olympians wanted in an event created successful intergroup contact, as recommended by Allport (1954) and Pettigrew (1998).

Given that students showed positive changes in attitudes toward individuals with intellectual disabilities, one may argue these attitudes changed because of student participation in the experiential learning project (including both the instructional classroom education and hands-on portion), which created successful intergroup contact between the

students and the SO participants (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998). Importantly, through the combination of the instructional classroom education and the hands-on portion of the experiential learning project, students seemed to benefit from assisting others, developing positive relationships, and increasing their awareness and sensitivity to societal stereotypes directed at individuals with intellectual disabilities (Diacin & Vansickle, 2014). Taken together, these findings support previous research suggesting experiential learning brings a deeper level of understanding and enables change in attitudes toward those with intellectual disabilities (Denicolo et al., 1992). Furthermore, the more experience students can accumulate before graduation, the greater the variety of experiences gained, the more likely they are to achieve employment in such a competitive field (Dees & Hall, 2012).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

While these findings are promising, limitations must be addressed. First, the qualitative interviews were limited to a small sample size of students from one Midwestern university, which may not be representative of the experiences and/or outcomes of others who have worked this event or events similar. Future research should include a larger sample size and consider socio-demographic factors (e.g., age, prior contact with someone with a disability, educational attainment) that may impact student experiences and/or outcomes. Second, there was no measure of student perceptions of intellectual disability prior to the experiential learning project and data were collected in a cross-sectional nature. As such, future research may benefit from longitudinally assessing student’s prior knowledge, attitudes and prejudices regarding intellectual disability across time. Finally, the interviews were conducted in a retrospective manner, which may lead to biases and an overall lack of description of some of the more unproductive or inefficient aspects of the experiential learning process.

Conclusion

These findings show the long-term impact and transformational learning and cognitive processes necessary for knowledge to be created by experience and “doing” (Kolb, 1984). Experiential learning projects in service-learning professional fields are highly impactful (Wozencroft et al., 2015). Students can gain knowledge and skills through this hands-on approach, put theory into practice and develop new tools for the execution of a successful sporting or physical activity event. Moreover, facilitated

intergroup contact among sport management professionals can provide opportunities for developing diversity-related competencies, reducing biases, and growing sports and physical activity for individuals with intellectual, cognitive, emotional, or physical disabilities. Furthermore, sport management professionals and faculty should continue to consider projects that benefit all members involved, including the participants, athletes, and key stakeholders. By collaborating with organizations such as Special Olympics, sport management students can gain diverse perspectives and multicultural competencies.

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Table 1
 Content Analysis

Analytical Themes	Occurrences	Descriptive Themes
<i>Prior Experiences with Special Olympics or Adapted Physical Activity</i>	Yes – 6 No – 1 N/A – 1	high school experiences; adaptive physical education programs; unified sports; National Honor Society; special education programs; hosted SO games; similar organizations to SO; coaching; officiating
<i>Understanding and Acceptance of Special Olympics Athletes</i>	Improved – 8 Lessened/Remained the Same – 0	educational; appreciation; enjoyment; smiles; family members that play adapted sports; happiness; findings peace; organization of practices and games; broaden horizons; encouragement; supportive; emotional; tears in athletes/spectator eyes; selflessness; teamwork; broadened horizons; athletes' aura; skill level; involvement; success; competitors; high energy; sportsmanship, camaraderie
<i>Prior Prejudices and Biases</i>	Yes – 2 No – 2 Maybe – 4	biased in a more caring way; soft spot; people may view them as lesser; unintentional biases; lack of understanding; all positive and trying to be productive; more frustrations related to event management; welcoming of the idea; natural biases; no classmates had explicit biases or prejudices; can't say with certainty that classmates didn't have biases or prejudices
<i>Changes in Attitudes Related to Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities</i>	Yes – 7 n/a – 1	biased in a more caring way; soft spot; people may view them as lesser; unintentional biases; lack of understanding; all positive and trying to be productive; more frustrations related to event management; welcoming of the idea; natural biases; no classmates had explicit biases or prejudices; can't say with certainty that classmates didn't have biases or prejudices
<i>Future Participation in Special Olympics on Similar Movement</i>	Yes – 7 n/a – 1	we should be doing more; too much focus on able-bodied athletes; create more opportunities; parents now want to be involved; more inclusion on social media; volunteer; go watch similar events; more coverage in media; professional athletes as role models and ambassadors; definitely want to be involved in the future; hope to remain involved; not a career path; learning more about SO opportunities; students from first-year cohort volunteering for next-years event; volunteering or coaching in the future
<i>Recommendations for Course Project</i>	All	highlight of college career; event helps with progress; kept the focus on the athletes; turned out exactly how we wanted it to; instructor did a great job hyping up the event; we could have done more to promote event and get spectators; great leadership; hope to attend this event in the future; meaningful; experiences with different groups; give students resources for getting involved with SO or similar movements; some students didn't enjoy the work; more awareness for SO as a career path; not the same as if we had hosted a scholastic basketball game; recommend continuation of working with SO; brought divers groups from around campus; spectators were invested in the game