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# Evaluating Graduate Student Out-of-Class Learning: The Professional Field Trip

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Out-of-class experiences provide important learning opportunities for students; however, limited research has explored the value of these experiences to graduate students. The purpose of this study was to evaluate graduate sport management students' professional field trip experiences to determine if they met student expectations and achieved trip learning objectives. Results from pre- and post-trip surveys, a student focus group, and industry professional interviews suggested the trip exceeded expectations overall. Specifically, it improved students' professional preparation, helped them connect to course content, and increased their connection to the academic program. Students perceived the trip to be a valuable educational and social experience. Sport management faculty should consider coordinating field trips for graduate students, as they perceive them to be beneficial to their learning and graduate student experience. Also, evaluating out-of-class experiences is valuable for improving institutional support and providing evidence of student learning outcomes.

There are many reasons why students decide to pursue sport management graduate degrees. For some, it represents an opportunity to gain experience in the collegiate sport industry by working as a graduate assistant. For others, it helps them explore their career interests and develop their professional skills while working as a full- or part-time employee. As a result of busy schedules and multiple responsibilities, it is often challenging for faculty to engage graduate students in valuable out-of-class learning experiences, which can help them develop personal, professional, and academic skills.

Graduate students often attend classes at night based on the time demands created by their full-time, part-time, or graduate assistant employment positions. These work experiences are valuable out-of-class experiences for university students because they are able to observe their hopeful field of employment (Higgins, Dewhurst, & Watkins, 2012). Unfortunately, because of the time demands of these jobs, their opportunities for growth and development outside of the classroom or work can be limited. However, these out-of-class experiences are important because they can be vital parts of the learning experience as they impact student learning and development (Kuh, 1995). Some examples of out-of-class learning experiences include job shadowing, field trips, volunteer activities, and networking with professionals in the field through interviews. Graduate faculty should consider organizing structured out-of-class learning experiences for graduate students that will supplement their classroom and work experiences.

Many different out-of-class activities can lead to positive outcomes for college students (Kuh, 1995), and these experiences can be categorized into three areas including student support, connecting students to campus, and co-curricular engagement (Franklin, 2013). Examples of out-of-class learning activities include conversing with faculty, collaborating on teaching and research projects, living in a residence hall, working, and participating in institutional governance, as well as involvement in clubs and organizations, volunteerism (Kuh, 1993), field trips (Lei, 2010), and employment (Franklin, 2013).

Out-of-class activities are beneficial because they can increase students' self-awareness, autonomy, confidence and self-worth, altruism, reflective thought, social competence, practical competence, knowledge acquisition, academic skills, application of knowledge, esthetic appreciation, vocational competence, and sense of purpose (Kuh, 1993). According to Krakowka (2012), "teaching is more than simply giving students information; it is about inspiring student interest in a subject" (p. 236). She continues to explain that it is the teacher's job to encourage students to be actively involved in the learning process, and field trips provide a venue for this type of active learning. Seeing professionals working in the field allows students to "observe employees demonstrating a work ethic, helping others, and working efficiently" (Brunt Veverka, 2015, p. 49). Industry engagement, according to Bruns and Chopra (2017), is an important part of student learning, and field trips are one example of this type of engagement. The purpose of this study was to assess a professional field trip and its impacts on student learning and development. This was achieved by examining student-reported experiences and learning outcomes related to the trip. The trip is designed to encourage students to learn professionally, utilize networking skills, and gain insight into the real world of working in sport management. During this trip, networking included getting to know other students in the program outside of their existing circle and meeting professionals.

## Literature Review

Chickering and Gamson (1987) stated, "Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much

just by sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers" (p. 4). While these authors were advocating for active learning in the classroom, their statement also highlights the importance of engaging students in active, out-of-class learning experiences to improve their learning and development in college. Research in higher education often applies the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984) to examine student engagement outside of the classroom. According to Astin (1984), the theory of student involvement "emphasizes active participation of the student in the learning process" (p. 522). He suggests that the extent to which students will achieve learning outcomes depends on the time and effort devoted to their goals. The greater the student involvement, the greater the learning and development (Astin, 1984). As a framework for this study, the theory of student involvement would suggest that the more involved graduate students are in their educational experience, the greater gains they will make in learning and personal development. A professional field trip provides an opportunity for students to put in effort and time to increase their development and learning.

From a general perspective, Kuh (1995) found that interactions with peers during out-of-class learning experiences were important for developing personal competence, humanitarianism, and cognitive complexity. Additionally, out-of-class academic activities were important for helping students apply knowledge they learned while in class. Kuh (1995) also determined students valued leadership, peer interaction, faculty interaction, outside of class academic activities, work, travel, and institutional ethos as positively impacting their learning outside of the classroom. More specifically, Berte and Jones (2014) acknowledged field trips as a well-established strategy for increasing student learning, reflection, and engagement. Also, they found students valued the field trip as a learning experience. In fact, past research on field trips has indicated that cognitive and affective learning can occur as a result of these experiences (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008). Field trips can increase synthesis of information, improve reasoning skills, increase self-confidence and efficacy, and improve research collaboration skills (Lei, 2010). Students are also able to learn first-hand and make learning more enjoyable (Lei, 2010). The instructor and students can interact in a more relaxed setting and build stronger relationships with teachers (Lei, 2010). Potentially, the field trip can be structured to encourage students to apply what they learned in the classroom to a professional setting.

For elementary and high school students, research has shown that field trips have long-term impacts on cognitive, social, and cultural understanding (Forest & Rayne, 2009). Forest and Rayne (2009) found using field trips in a post-secondary chemistry course to be a useful way to reinforce class concepts and suggested positioning out-of-class activities during class to help students see the value during the experiences. They also found that students were more interested in continuing in the chemistry major. In a study on middle school students, Whitesell (2016) found small positive effects of participating in field trips on students' science scores.

Some research has also been conducted on college students' perceptions of field trips. Through informal discussions with her students, Krakowka (2012) learned college students remembered field trips the most, which motivated them to learn. Similarly, teacher education students found field trips to be memorable, while also reporting they gained new knowledge and cemented their understanding of course concepts (Djonko-Moore & Joseph, 2016). These students also valued the authentic learning experience (Djonko-Moore & Joseph, 2016), a finding that may be similar across disciplines. Based on surveys of undergraduate history students across multiple years of a course, Rohlf (2015) determined that field trips had long-term impacts on behaviors and attitudes, and positively impacted learning.

Leydon and Turner (2013) found that field trips have many benefits for undergraduate students. First, students were able to gain a deeper understanding of course content and gain valuable experience with equipment by taking field trips. Second, students felt the trip allowed them to connect with peers, which was an important goal. Finally, students were able to better connect with faculty as a result of this trip. Overall, they determined that introducing a field trip into the course resulted in a more positive and interactive learning environment, increased student engagement and comprehension, and positively facilitated the transition from high school to college for students. Moreover, Malbrecht, Campbell, Chen, and Zheng (2016) suggested a field trip for college chemistry students was valuable, not only for getting experience using equipment, but also for linking students to professionals in the field and helping them see themselves as future employees.

Research examining impacts of field trips on graduate students is limited; however, Castleberry (2007) examined the impacts of a trip to a prison on graduate and undergraduate students in a business ethics course. He evaluated the trip by surveying students after trip completion. Results indicated that students who attended the trip had a positive impression of the trip and felt all objectives of the trip were achieved. He determined that this method was effective for helping students learn and connect to legal and ethical issues in business. Based on these findings, it seems graduate students also can benefit from out-of-class learning experiences tied to course content, but more research is needed.

The purported benefits of field trips suggest that these experiences can help students build social connections, and research has shown that developing interpersonal relationships in college can positively impact academic performance (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Martin and Dowson (2009) explain that these social relationships are a part of relatedness, which is an academic domain and is important for teaching students how to function in academic environments, which in turn impacts persistence and performance. For graduate students, Hlebec, Kogovsek, and Ferligoj (2011) found that social support and personal networks positively impacted academic performance, a finding that has been duplicated in multiple studies across differing levels of college students (Pym, Goodman, & Patsika, 2011). Additionally, Tinto (1975) explained that social integration into college helped students persist and resist dropout. Tinto's assertion was supported by a study conducted by Robbins, Allen, Casillas, Peterson, and Le (2006), which determined that social connections positively impacted retention of college students.

Astin (1984) noted that the theory of student involvement should be explored by assessing different forms of student involvement. Experiential learning and out-of-class learning are examples of student involvement that should be assessed to determine their impact on student learning and development. Explicit research on the learning outcomes of experiential learning is needed to determine if these strategies are effective or not (Gosen & Washbush, 2004). Additionally, since the majority of past research has focused on undergraduate student involvement, Pontius and Harper (2006) advocated for research into student engagement outcomes for graduate students. Finally, this research is valuable because asking for student feedback post-trip is an important learning experience for an instructor (Lei, 2010).

This study endeavors to assess the learning outcomes and effectiveness of a professional field trip for graduate students. The trip was planned using the nine guidelines suggested by DeWitt and Storksdieck (2008), which were created after a comprehensive review of the literature on field trips. These guidelines suggest field trips should 1) be based on the goals and contexts needed for the class; 2) be embedded into the curriculum; 3) offer multiple learning opportunities; 4) create opportunities to utilize the unique qualities of the setting; 5) provide structure, but also allow time for exploration; 6) give students some control over the experience; 7) encourage students to engage in discussions with peers and others involved in the trip; 8) be based on exploration, discovery, or process skills instead of merely facts; and 9) be improved through feedback of teachers and students. The following research questions were explored:

1. Did the field trip meet student expectations?
2. Were the goals of the trip met?
3. How do students believe the professional field trip augmented their learning?
4. How can the experience be improved in the future to enhance student learning and development?

## Method

The professional field trip examined in this study is taken annually during the fall semester. All graduate students in the sport management sequence are invited to attend; however, attendance is not a mandatory element of the students' degree program. Each year, the field trip visits a different major city in the Midwest and is planned by students in the program. In the year this study took place, students planned a trip to Milwaukee, WI, where they visited the BMO Harris Bradley Center, Marquette University athletics facilities, and Miller Park. Students travelled to Milwaukee in two vans, which were assigned to help students get to know other students with whom they did not work with or take classes with already. During the visit to BMO Harris Bradley Center, students participated in a networking session, which consisted of local professionals hosting roundtable discussions with students. Students were asked to move three times during the session to meet different professionals. Prior to the trip, students were told there would be a networking session and they were given biographies of the professionals. They were also told to dress professionally and come with specific questions either written down or in mind to ask these professionals, in order to make this session more valuable and focused. This session was the main networking session outside of their cohort of peers. Students were then taken on a tour of the building. Next, students visited Marquette University for a tour of their athletics facilities. Finally, students attended a baseball game at Miller Park, where they were encouraged to get to know peers in the program that they did not have classes with (first-year students were encouraged to get to know second-year students and vice versa).

Three second-year graduate students planned the trip early in the fall 2016 semester under the guidance of faculty. Students planned the event as part of their culminating experience in the program. Also, having students plan the event helped create buy-in and ensured that students would be interested in, and excited about, the trip's itinerary. We have found that giving students ownership of the trip conveys the value of their contributions to the entire program and solidifies their connection as active participants in their learning.

Additionally, these students assisted in the present study and, as such, were neither part of the sample surveyed nor the focus group interview conducted. Berte and Jones (2014) advocated for creating detailed learning outcomes prior to planning the trip. These students met with faculty and created the following learning objectives prior to planning the event:

1. Establish a relationship with professionals in the field to build your professional network.
2. Gain advice on your career path and the skills needed to be successful in the sport industry from professionals currently working in the field.
3. Expand your knowledge of the next step in your careers by getting in touch with people who recently graduated and are working in sport.
4. Improve your networking skills by giving you an opportunity to utilize them.
5. Enrich your graduate school experience by participating in a fun and enjoyable immersion experience.
6. Build camaraderie among students in the program to improve cohesion on class projects and build long-term connections.
7. Enhance your knowledge of sport facilities and how they are run.
8. Help you see connections between course content and real-world applications of the content.
9. Explore college and professional sport entities to broaden your view of potential career options in the field.

The Human Subjects Committee granted approval for this research project. The trip was classified as an out-of-class experience as there was no grade attached to their participation and it was not attached to any specific course. It was an educational and professional development experience.

This study was conducted as an action research project, which is a process where teachers scrutinize their own teaching practices and analyze the results of their inquiries in an effort to make positive changes in their teaching (Crothers, 2015). Because of the reflective nature of these projects, they are content specific and generally conducted in the teacher's classroom (Crothers, 2015; Efron & Ravid, 2013). Investigating their teaching methods in this way provides teachers with evidence to support for the pedagogical decisions they make (Crothers, 2015). Action research includes four stages as explained by Mills (2000), including deciding on an area of focus, collecting data, evaluating and interpreting data, and making a plan of action. Action research was an appropriate research design for this study because the specific and reflective nature provides information that is actionable and evidence for future practices. This mixed-methods study used qualitative and quantitative data to examine the research questions. To increase the reliability of data, data for the project were triangulated and included surveys, a student focus group, and interviews with professionals. The survey was created by writing statements related to the learning objectives and adapting a group of questions used by Berte and Jones (2014). Questions for the focus group and interviews were developed based on the objectives and trip events. Both the interviews and focus group were semi-structured, where an interview guide was created to guide the interview, but researchers were given the autonomy to ask follow-up questions as needed. All researchers reviewed the survey, focus group, and interview questions to ensure they were aligned with the trip goals and were asking students and professionals questions that would provide information related to whether or not these goals were met.

Prior to participating in the trip, graduate students who signed up for the trip were sent a pre-trip survey with questions related to the defined learning objectives, as well as questions related to their expectations for the trip. Twenty-two students attended the trip and were invited to participate. Of these, 18 completed the pre-trip survey. The survey link created through Qualtrics was emailed directly to students. Once students returned from the trip, they were emailed a link to the post-trip survey, which contained the same questions, revised in past tense, as the pre-trip survey. Nineteen students completed the post-trip survey. Data from the survey were downloaded into SPSS Statistics Version 22, and descriptive statistics and t-tests were used to examine differences in means.

A group of six attendees were selected at random to participate in the post-trip focus group. Six students were chosen because focus groups are most effective when six to twelve participants are used, and since 22 students attended the trip, 6 students included 25% of the population studied. All students were entered into a database alphabetically, and then a random number generator was used to invite respondents. Once six respondents agreed to participate, the focus group was scheduled. One researcher conducted the focus group while the student researchers observed the group and took notes. The group lasted approximately 45 minutes. Data were transcribed for thematic content analysis. The six-step thematic content analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze data. First, the two faculty researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading it through multiple times. Then, initial codes were generated using inductive coding. Once data were coded, both researchers searched for themes and organized the data into themes. Then themes were shared between the two researchers and themes were reviewed and discussed. Themes were defined, named, and then reviewed by both again. Finally, a report on the data was produced.

Table 1
*Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Perceptions of Participating in the Field Trip*

| Statements (changed to past tense for post-trip survey) | Pre | | Post | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Help me to cement difficult information | 3.74 | .81 | 3.72 | .90 |
| Encourage me to interact in a more relaxed environment | 4.26 | .93 | 4.39 | .50 |
| Allow me to escape the routine of the classroom | 4.58 | 1.02 | 4.89 | .32 |
| Increase my motivation for learning | 4.26 | 1.10 | 4.39 | .70 |
| Provide me with firsthand experience related to the topics discussed in the program | 4.53 | .96 | 4.50 | .62 |

Table 2
*Means and Standard Deviations for Student Perceptions' of Attaining Learning Objectives*

| Statements (changed to past tense for post-trip survey) | Pre | | Post | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *M* | *SD* | *M* | *SD* |
| Have more professional contacts. | 4.11 | .99 | 4.00 | .84 |
| Have improved my networking skills. | 4.16 | .96 | 4.22 | .65 |
| Have a deeper knowledge of what it is like to work in the sport industry. | 4.26 | .93 | 4.28 | .58 |
| Be more excited about my future in sport management. | 4.37 | .96 | 4.22 | .73 |
| Feel more connected to my cohort. | 4.53 | .96 | 4.67 | .59 |
| Know more about what to expect in my future career. | 3.89 | .99 | 4.11 | 1.02 |
| Have a better understanding of the job search process. | 3.68 | 1.11 | 3.61 | .98 |
| Be able to see connections between course content and real-world application. | 4.21 | .92 | 4.39 | .50 |
| Be glad I participated in the trip. | 4.63 | .96 | 4.89 | .32 |
| Feel the trip was a valuable experience. | 4.63 | .96 | 4.83 | .38 |
| Know more about my potential career path. | 4.00 | 1.05 | 3.94 | .87 |
| Have built at least one solid connection with an industry professional. | 4.05 | 1.03 | 3.56 | 1.10 |
| Be more knowledgeable about the next step in my career. | 3.89 | .94 | 3.56 | 1.04 |
| Feel that I had fun while on the trip. | 4.53 | .96 | 4.89 | .32 |
| Be more comfortable completing class projects with other students in my cohort. | 4.05 | 1.03 | 4.56 | .51 |
| Have a better understanding of sport facilities and how they are operated. | 4.32 | 1.00 | 4.39 | .61 |
| Have expanded my knowledge of potential career options in professional sport. | 4.16 | .96 | 4.17 | .51 |
| Have expanded my knowledge of potential career options in college sport. | 4.05 | .91 | 4.06 | .73 |

The last source of data was from professionals students interacted with during the trip. Five professionals were selected for interviews using convenience sampling. Student researchers conducted interviews over the phone, which lasted 10-30 minutes each. Because data saturation was reached after these five interviews, data were then transcribed. The thematic analysis process described in the focus group analysis was used.

## Results

This study utilized a survey, focus group, and interviews to collect data in an effort to examine the expectations of students in the program. These data were collected from students in the program, as well as industry professionals who engaged with the students throughout the trip. Results are presented and organized by the type of data. Summative conclusions are then drawn with respect to all forms of data collected.

### Surveys

When comparing the pre- and post-test survey results, student responses remained stable on the Berte and Jones (2014) scale (Table 1). After participating in the field trip, students felt strongly about all statements except cementing difficult information, which was rated the lowest on the five-point scale. They most appreciated the escape from the routine of the classroom.

Students also were asked a series of statements related to the learning objectives for the trip. Table 2 lists the means and standard deviations of their pre- and post-trip survey scores. Overall, there were no significant differences between pre- and post- surveys, which indicated the trip met student expectations.

Overall, students felt moderately to extremely positive about attending the field trip both before (17 students) and after (17 students) the trip.

**Focus Group**

Responses during the focus group solidified students' overall positive feelings related to the trip, and the successful completion of the learning outcomes. Figure 1 organizes the themes.

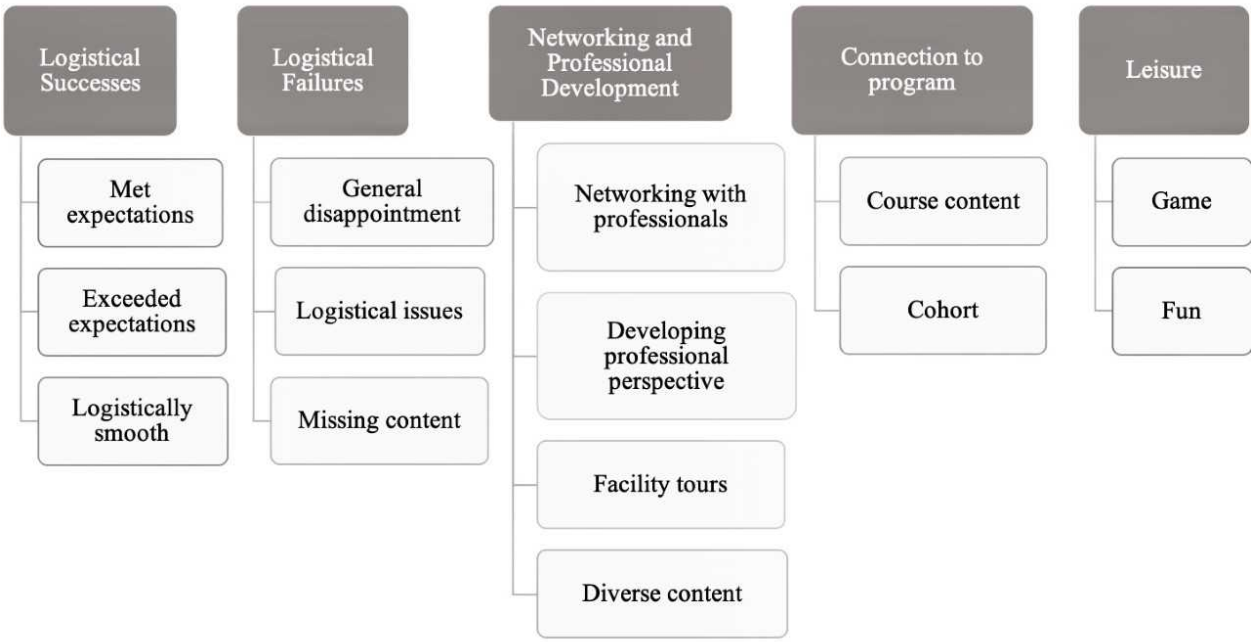
**Logistical successes.** Students felt that the trip met or exceeded their expectations. One student commented, "I didn't think it was going to be as good as it was." Additionally, the trip was logistically smooth. One student appreciated the set-up of the networking panel, stating, "You got that sheet of the panel and where they were from and what they did. I thought that was very valuable and just being able to identify with who you'd like to talk to more."

**Logistical failures.** Overall, student frustrations were related to issues outside of the organizers' control, such as hoping for access to things that were not available, wanting additional panel members in their specific areas, or being frustrated with too much down time between events.

**Networking and professional development.** The ability to effectively network, improve their knowledge of the field, and take in diverse content was important to students. One student highlighted the connection made to a future career path, stating, "Actually being able to pick the brains of some of them and seeing what their path to their career was really helpful." Also, students commented on how the set-up of the event allowed them to get more detail: "[T]he table discussions versus the panel allows for good and more, better follow-up questions because when you're handed a mic and you ask your one question and want more clarification, you get two or so minutes after that, but if you don't, you're up a creek, so the opportunity to ask more personalized questions and get answers that ways definitely helps enhance the experience." Students were also able to gain perspective that they were currently lacking in their classroom and work experience. Specifically, one respondent stated, "I think anytime you have the opportunity to see things from a different perspective, to get out of a) your bubble and b) your comfort zone," while another highlighted, "Definitely providing perspective on things that I thought I had experience in, and someone comes in, and they have a lot more to say about it." Finally, students valued the diverse content, stating, "I also appreciated the breadth of the scope of the trip in terms of really getting a feel for a couple of different avenues within sports management."

**Connection to the program.** Students who responded specifically mentioned how they connected what they learned on the trip to things discussed in

Figure 1
Focus group themes



class. For example, one student stated, "I've even mentioned twice things that I talked about on the trip with a couple [of] other students in class, saying, 'You were talking about this. Well, what do you think about this' and having that apply directly to some of the SBJ posts or even just class discussions where you get other people's perspectives." Additionally, another student explained, "I would say from Intro to Sport, we talk a lot about the business side of things, and sometimes when you watch a game, you don't really thing about what is going on, so I think you've done a good job of drilling that into our minds because I was watching the Cardinal's game the other night, and that was one thing that I thought of." Another important aspect of the connection to the program was their connection to each other. Multiple students mentioned this:

- "We probably don't get to know each other as much within the classroom, so that was a way for us to get out and build those relationships and get to know one another."
- "And knowing how we all got into this and how different all of our interests are and our backgrounds is pretty awesome, to be able to pull from as many different backgrounds and interests as we can when we interact in the future, beyond class."
- "When you add in the shared experience with your classmates that you may previously not [have] known as well, I think it definitely adds a lot of value to that."

**Leisure.** Finally, students felt the trip allowed them to have fun and relax. One student explained the trip was important because it was "just having a good time talking and hanging out." They valued the experience as a way to de-stress and "get out of that setting and go have a good time…." Also, students were able to enjoy sport outside of work and school and stated that the game was their favorite part of the trip. One student was even excited about the experience because "catching a foul ball was pretty cool."

### Interviews with Professionals

To corroborate students' feelings and perceptions about the trip, interviews were conducted with professionals the students interacted with during the trip. Interviewees included panel members, as well as individuals who conducted and facilitated tours and events. Interviews with professionals yielded four major themes related to the field trip including professional preparation, student engagement and interest, successes, and improvements.

**Professional preparation.** Respondents overwhelmingly indicated that students were well prepared for the trip and networking. One aspect of their preparation was their thoughtful and meaningful questions. One respondent indicated, "I think it was clearly evident that some had done their research, were ready to ask questions." These questions were often geared toward their careers. For example, one respondent shared, "They did ask pretty intriguing questions about getting your foot in the door and how to get yourself started in the field of sports." Students also demonstrated professionalism in attire and mannerisms. For example, respondents stated, "I think they approached the event very professionally," and, "…[E]ye contact, firm handshake, all that general stuff was on point."

**Student engagement and interest.** Interviews also revealed that students were engaged and interested during the trip. Multiple respondents pointed out students' interest in what the professionals were sharing, stating, "They were interested in the subject matter," "…genuinely interested in the subject matter," and "…clear that they were interested in the subject matter." Additionally, students were engaged according to professionals who stated, "They were engaged on all fronts…," "Everyone was engaging…," and, "I think most of the students that came there were eager to learn…"

**Successes.** Overall, professionals had very positive comments about their interactions with students and the trip in general. One professional stated, "I have nothing but positive things to say about it." Another professional commended the program for taking students on a trip, stating, "I think what you're doing is pretty progressive. I think that's a great idea."

**Improvements.** Professionals were specifically asked about potential ways to improve the trip. Their comments focused on changing the panel format. One respondent suggested, "…[H]ave a more formalized or constructed round-table event where there was a set amount of time at each table…" Another suggested, ". . . [P]ossibly create a combination of sort of what we did and a social event with the panelists and kind of evolve that into something less formal." Finally, professionals suggested students could prepare more:

- "Coming with a reason is huge, a reason why you want to work in sports, as well as a reason as to why you're there in general."
- "Survey[ing] the students about who, or specific departments, they would like to network with."

## Discussion

Out-of-class learning experiences are vital to students on college campuses nationwide (Higgins et al., 2012). Sport management as a discipline has

evolved into a highly applied area of study, and in order to find employment in the highly competitive sport industry, sport management students must develop strong professional networks and gain real-world experiences, or they run the risk of failing to ever begin down their chosen career path. Because of this, it is imperative for sport management faculty to connect students with the industry outside of the classroom. Since field trips are a well-established strategy for enhancing student learning and engagement (Berte & Jones, 2014), the program in this study has offered field trips for graduate students each academic year. This study evaluated the program's professional field trip that visited three facilities and allowed students to network with a number of individuals working in the sport industry in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Further, this study endeavored to answer four research questions: 1) Did the field trip meet student expectations? 2) Were the goals of the field trip met? 3) How do students believe the field trip augmented their learning? 4) How can the experience be improved in the future to enhance student learning and development? Results of this study provide evidence that addresses these questions and the trip's learning objectives.

In general, the field trip to Milwaukee exceeded student expectations, as evaluated by Berte and Jones' (2014) out-of-class learning scale, which measured student perceptions. Specifically, the trip encouraged students to interact, allowed them to escape the classroom routine, and increased their motivation to learn. As it relates to the nine learning objectives of the trip, results indicated student expectations were met as well. Combined with Castleberry's (2007) findings, the results indicate field trips can be effective for enhancing graduate student learning outside of class. However, it is possible that the consistency in student responses before and after the trip could be credited to their understanding of the field trip and the itinerary for the day's trip, prior to attending, as well as the fact that the trip delivered on promises made. One item of concern from this survey was the decrease in the expectation that the trip would improve their understanding of the job process. Potentially, creating talking points for students to take to the networking event could remind them to ask questions related to finding a job.

Student responses from the focus group supported the survey data. Students highlighted a general theme of the trip exceeding expectations, while specifically noting having the itinerary and information on the panel members prior to the trip being an unexpected positive that set them up for success during their experience. Further, while an additional theme of logistical failures was identified, none of the sub-themes that emerged indicated the trip either generally or in a specific area fell below student expectations. In this study, no differences between pre- and post-trip scores indicate the trip was successful in this regard. Overall, realizing students received the benefits they expected from the trip supports the continued use of the trip to augment their learning experience. Additionally, it speaks to the success of the current planning process. Other faculty who plan to implement a professional field trip should carefully organize the trip's goals, create a student planning committee, and communicate the trip's itinerary to attendees at the start of the trip.

This study also examined if the goals of the educational field trip, which were specified by the faculty and students upon planning the trip, were met upon conclusion of the day. Results indicate each of these learning objectives was met; however, it is clear that a concerted effort should be made in the future to prepare students for the networking environment they will encounter. Other researchers have highlighted this, such as Trimble (2015), who stated it is important to properly prepare students for the site visit to a business, and McLoughlin (2004), who stressed the importance of students being prepared for the trip by examining their own expectations and understanding how the trip ties to their in-class learning. Since this field trip takes place outside of a specific class, students were not given any pre-trip information or preparation. One important suggestion for this field trip is to hold an introductory or pre-trip session that allows students to get together and discuss and learn about what they will be doing prior to leaving on the trip. Additionally, faculty can provide a networking skill session prior to the trip so that students feel more prepared for the experience, as well as to help students create questions for professionals they will meet during the trip.

Interestingly, the objectives that students rated highest measured the trip's ability to connect them with their degree program and fellow students. Prior research from Leydon and Turner (2013) also found the connection to other students to be a positive outcome of field trips for college students. Further, another theme of connection to the degree program emerged from the focus groups. Students explained the unique connections they were able to forge among other students as a critical component of the experience. The strong connection students felt to the degree program is an important outcome of the trip because it will foster a deeper commitment to their coursework and improve their relationships with faculty. Also, it appears the trip fostered a camaraderie that is viewed as beneficial to the future learning experiences, such as group projects, of students throughout their degree program. Students' perceptions related to the importance of the social connections the trip resulted in support Martin and Dowson's (2009) and Tinto's (1975) claims that social connection is an important for academic success. It is critical that faculty realize the importance of intentionally encouraging student connectedness as an added way to support their growth, development, and success.

Additionally, students valued the entertainment and unique setting of the trip. Specifically, a unique theme related to the leisure experience of the trip emerged. Students described the overall enjoyable and fun experience they had while on the trip, specifically highlighting their attendance at the MLB game. Berte and Jones (2014) pointed to the importance of out-of-class experiences allowing students to relax and have fun. Often, between coursework and work, graduate students have little free time to simply enjoy sport. It is important for students to remain excited and passionate about the industry, thus allowing them to connect with the leisure side of the sport industry is necessary.

Students also indicated the trip helped them learn, further supporting the results of Malbrecht et al. (2016), Djonko-Moore and Joseph (2016), Rohlf (2015), Leydon and Turner (2013), and Castleberry (2007), which suggest field trips are important learning experiences for college students. Survey results indicated that students felt they developed a deeper knowledge of the field, could see strong connections to course content, understood sport facilities with greater expertise, and were more comfortable collaborating on future in-class projects and assignments. Additionally, students saw the connection to course content that had been covered during the semester to be an important part of the trip. More specifically, students explained that the field trip augmented their overall learning experience by allowing them to connect the trip with past course content, see examples of course topics in practice, and learn through the facility tours. For many faculty, a main reason to take professional field trips relates to the opportunity for students to make these connections. It is important to continue to connect to the field trip in class after it occurs to further cement these connections.

Finally, a theme of professional development and networking was evident throughout the surveys and discussions with students, supporting the findings of Malbrecht et al. (2016) that professional development is an important piece of field trips for college students. This theme included student reflections on many of the trip objectives, such as networking, development of a professional perspective, and facility tours. When viewed in relation to the survey data, it is possible students are perceiving an overall connection between the information they received and its role in their professional development.

While the general response by the student focus groups indicated the objectives were met, it should be noted that students did identify missing content as a sub-theme of the logistical weaknesses of the trip. This missing content was related to connecting with specific professionals in their field. In the future, students who may attend the trip should be surveyed prior to the trip to identify common areas of interest. This will help the students planning the trip to purposefully reach out to professionals who meet the majority of students' professional goals.

The last goal of this study was to identify ways the trip might be improved. While the trip did generally exceed expectations and the majority of the feedback received indicated students and industry professionals enjoyed and benefitted from the event, two significant areas should be addressed in the future. First, the planning team for this trip should consider ways to further connect the information elements of the trip to the future career path students will take. Specifically, finding ways to incorporate substantive feedback by industry professionals on student resumes, cover letters, or interviewing skills could be relevant. Incorporating these types of initiatives may serve to deepen the connection between the trip and its content and the career development of the students. Second, additional efforts should be made to tailor industry representation from the specific career areas students who register to attend the trip are seeking as mentioned above. While the focus on venue and event management was beneficial and the diversity of organization type was appreciated, students would benefit from connecting with more early to middle career professionals in the specific roles they see themselves seeking.

To triangulate the data, we also sought the opinions of the professionals who interacted with students during the trip. Overall, professionals agreed that the trip was a valuable and important experience for students. They also supported students' general perceptions that they were successful in using and improving their networking skills when talking with the professionals. Additionally, they felt their conversations were beneficial in helping students understand their jobs and the sport industry. Finally, professionals overall thought the event was excellent, but they suggested offering a more social environment to connect with students as well. Since students really valued their leisure experience, it might be beneficial to add a short social with professionals as well, potentially prior to attending the game, to allow students to capitalize on that relaxed environment for connecting with professionals.

The final step in action research is the teacher's reflection on, and application of, what was learned. The instructors in this study were pleased that the overall student experience on the trip was positive. Students reported a high degree of satisfaction with the trip's ability to meet their expectations on most criteria, and the themes that emerged from the focus group data were generally positive in nature. As a result, a primary consideration for the researchers is to continue offering the trip in a similar format. The trip's ability to facilitate networking among industry professionals, as well as to develop student-to-student connections within the cohort, is a critical result of this learning

activity. These types of interpersonal connections have always been a focal point for the academic program in which the students in this study were enrolled. As such, the industry field trip is viewed as a strength that should be retained. For the researchers, it was especially important to learn how much students valued connecting with each other and their perception that this is important to their success in the program. In the future, adding a student mentoring component to the program would capitalize on the value of connecting students across cohorts and potentially increase the benefits of social connections that students experienced during the trip.

It is notable that the students did not feel the trip helped them cement difficult course content to the degree the researchers would have hoped. In the future, the program will seek to create an itinerary and talking points for the networking sessions that will allow students to have conversations that go beyond professional development advice and are also directed toward strategic decision-making in the field. Additionally, it may be helpful to host a post-trip meeting, so students receive a debriefing session where they can actively reflect on the trip, ask questions, and connect more firmly to course content. Finally, while logistical issues with regard to traveling in a large group are to some degree inevitable, more student input during the planning phase of the trip helps increase buy-in and lessen the negative effects of logistical failures.

The value of evaluating the field trip cannot be overstated, and the researchers would recommend faculty in other programs plan to evaluate similar trips or experiences for students in their programs. The data collected from students and professionals is valuable for improving future trips, encouraging future students to attend the trip, and asking for institutional support for the trip. Over time data can be collected and used to recruit new students to the program and showcase the benefits of the program to university administrators.

## Conclusion

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement suggests more involved students deepen their learning. The results of this study support that students who chose to attend the professional field trip felt they improved their overall graduate school experience. Students seem aware of the benefits of being actively involved in their learning and appreciate opportunities to do so. From a programmatic standpoint, graduate sport management programs should expand opportunities for students to become involved in their learning outside of class. This could include a professional field trip, but it might also involve seminars, workshops, or volunteer experiences.

Evaluating the field trip provided our department with actionable data for upcoming years. Student expectations were met or exceeded, although students did make a few suggestions for change, such as providing more content in their interest areas. In subsequent years, we will provide networking training prior to the trip. The trip also met the learning objectives it was designed to achieve, such as improving job expectations and networking skills, connecting students across cohorts, and allowing students to have fun outside the classroom. Students found professional, personal, and social value in the trip by learning more about their field and career and connecting their trip experiences to course content. Continual assessment of the trip will help provide a case for continued funding and inspire departmental support.

While this study focused on evaluating one year of the professional field trip in one program, this type of action research can provide suggestions for faculty in other programs. However, future research should apply a similar framework to trips at multiple universities or should be conducted longitudinally. A common issue with research on teaching and learning is the inability to connect learning experiences with improvements in knowledge or learning. Future research should create measures related to student knowledge pre- and post-trip to provide this type of evidence of student learning. While very valuable, student perceptions provide one piece of the assessment picture, and faculty should continually strive to corroborate perceptions with other evidence of learning. Future research should also examine other graduate student out-of-class learning experiences, such as the graduate assistantship, to evaluate student learning outcomes related to work experiences.

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