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Sport Management Internship Quality and the Development of Political Skill

A Conceptual Model

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Cole G. Armstrong

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Abstract

Internships are a key component of sport organizations and the sport management curriculum. Due to the vastness of internships both in academia and the sport profession, it is imperative to understand the effectiveness of internships for both the organization and the intern. While previous research has focused on quality control, the agency's perspective of internships, the student's perspective, and how to link the theory to practice, scholars have yet to examine the effects of sport management internships on the development of essential professional skills and/or attributes. Given the political nature of obtaining and keeping a job in the sport business, the purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual model that allows the effectiveness of a sport management internship to be evaluated according to its effect on the political skill of interns. Understanding the internship as one component of the sport management curricula, the conceptual model links sport management students' developmental experiences, and internship quality to the development of political skill, and three secondary outcomes (i.e., domain-specific self-efficacy, sport industry identification, and future employment intentions). In doing so a comprehensive method for evaluating the effectiveness of internships that prioritizes the student's growth is offered.

Keywords: *sport management internships, political skill, developmental experiences, self-efficacy*

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Introduction

The U.S. sports industry is estimated to be worth approximately \$470 billion, a figure that has been steadily growing in recent decades (Plunkett Research LTD, 2013). Sport is big business, and there is no shortage of managers—or aspiring managers—who wish to find employment within the sport industry. Reflecting this demand, the North American Society for Sport Management lists over 450 U.S. institutions offering related degrees, where students focus on “any combination of skills related to planning, organizing, directing, controlling, budgeting, leading, and evaluating within the context of an organization or department whose primary product or service is related to sport and/or physical activity” (DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990, p. 33)

The internship has become a key component of most sport management degree programs, with students spending periods of time working in the field (e.g., at a professional franchise, nonprofit sports organization, etc.). Indeed, Schoepfer and Dodds (2010) found that approximately 77% of sport management programs contain such a component. Great importance is placed on these experiences, as they represent a viable pathway to employment within the sport industry (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003), and are often a requirement for graduation (Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008). Many students complete more than one, and sometimes several, internships over the course of their degree.

Internships operate as agreements based on a simple exchange—students offer their time, effort, and services, and in return, they make industry contacts and develop the necessary skills to succeed within future work environments. The proposed benefits of these endeavors are well documented, as Baird (2002) noted, “Professionals and students in the helping professions consider internships, practicums, and field placements among the most influential experiences of their careers” (p. ix); yet, not all aspects of the experience appear to deliver what is expected. Sport management interns are not typically compensated for their time and effort, and remuneration tends to be minimal in those instances in which they are (Jowdy, McDonald, & Spence, 2004). Furthermore, students’ responsibilities are often limited to menial tasks (e.g., photocopying, data entry) that are unlikely to provide the developmental experiences that are intended. This is not to imply that all internships consist solely of such tasks, and many students benefit greatly from their time with their respective organizations; rather, there must be acknowledgement that different internships have different levels of developmental value.

Scholars have addressed a number of issues associated with sport management internships, such as quality control (Kelley, 2004); the agency’s perspective on sport management internships (Williams, 2004); the student’s perspective (Peretto Stratta, 2004); and how to link the theory to practice (Stier, 2002). However, the authors were unable to locate research in which scholars examined the effects of sport management internships on the development of essential professional skills and/or attributes. Given the central role of the internship in sport manage-

ment education, it is imperative that scholars identify appropriate constructs that can be used to evaluate their effectiveness against their supposed aims.

In this paper, the authors propose that the effectiveness of sport management internships could be evaluated according to their effect on the political skill of interns. Organizations are inherently political spaces (Mintzberg, 1985), and one's ability to operate effectively in these spaces will be contingent upon factors other than hard work and intelligence (Ferris et al., 2005). To this end, political skill is defined as "the ability to understand others at work and to use that knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal or organizational objectives" (Ferris et al., 2005, pp. 7). If the ultimate goal of sport management students is to find employment in the sports industry, political skill is as important, if not more so, than any other outcome of their internship experiences.

The authors propose a conceptual model for evaluating the effectiveness of sport management internships (see Figure 1). In the present context, developmental experiences refer to those experiences that can—or have—aided the development of political skill. This includes classroom education provided in sport management degree programs, through which students are provided with theoretical and second-hand knowledge about the sport industry and/or core competencies. However, as we go on to discuss, the potential for formative developmental experiences are likely to be greater within internships themselves. The extent to which students are prepared for employment in the sport industry is represented by the primary outcome of political skill. Students' propensity to seek out employment is addressed using three secondary constructs: a) perceived competence (domain-specific self-efficacy), b) identification with the sport industry, and c) intentions to pursue a sport industry job. These outcomes will be moderated by internship quality, where "quality" refers to the types of tasks allocated to interns, the level of responsibility they are given, and the interactions that they engage in during their work. Each component of the conceptual model will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

Theoretical Foundations and Proposition Development

In the following section, the components of the proposed conceptual model are introduced. First, internship quality and developmental experiences are defined in relation to the present context. Next, the dimensions of the political skill construct are presented, and related literature is reviewed. Finally, secondary outcomes of internships (i.e., domain-specific self-efficacy, sport industry identification, and future employment intentions) are addressed.

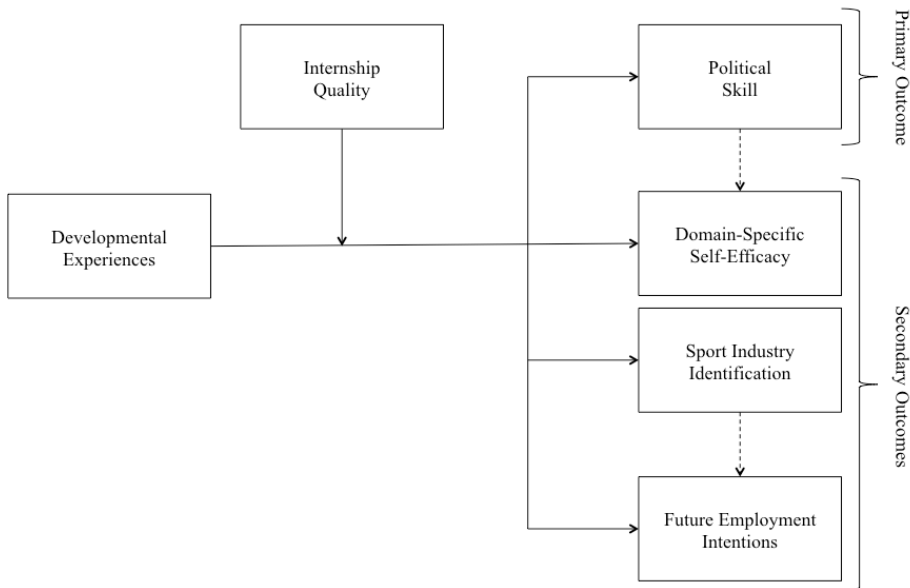


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Moderating Effect of Internship Quality on the Relationship between Developmental Experiences and Dependent Variables

Internship Quality

Accommodating student interns is amenable to organizations, as they are granted access to underpaid, and often free, labor (Jowdy et al., 2004). Early studies of internships primarily involved collecting responses from supervisors and other organization personnel, while neglecting the perspective of the interns themselves (Cole, Kolko, & Craddick, 1981). While internship coordinators at universities must be mindful of the benefits to sports organizations, their primary responsibility is to students' professional and educational development. This development does not only depend upon the aptitude of the student intern, but also the conditions of the internship (e.g., task diversity, experienced autonomy, level of supervision, workplace interactions) (Blustein, Prezioso, & Schultheiss, 1995).

In this regard, the conditions—or quality—of the internship will affect the outcomes for students. To examine the effects of internship quality, Gamboa, Paixão, and de Jesus (2013) conducted a pre-post study to assess high school students' vocational development over the course of an internship. Specifically, the authors examined the relationship between perceived quality of training experience (autonomy, colleagues, feedback, social support, learning opportunities, supervisor training, and supervisor support) and dimensions of career exploration (beliefs, behaviors, and reactions). Results indicated that all but one of the facets of internship quality directly predicted career exploration over the internship period.

Propensity to seek employment in the sport industry post-internship cannot be seen as the only outcome that is affected by internships. While the proposed model accounts for changes in sport industry identification and future intentions to work in the sport industry, it also includes self-perceptions of competency (i.e., political skill, and domain-specific self-efficacy). Based on the findings of Gamboa et al. (2013), and the purported developmental capacity of sport management internships, there is reason to believe that the quality of the internship will also moderate students' development in these areas.

Developmental Experiences

Ferris et al. (2007) noted that political skill is not simply trait-based, but is a learned behavior that can be developed. In this regard, developmental experiences are vital antecedents of political skill, and comprise two sub-processes: role modeling, and role mentoring (Ferris et al., 2007). By the time an individual reaches higher education, they will likely have identified numerous role models and mentors whose politically skilled (or unskilled) behaviors will have influenced their development. However, these processes are likely to be more beneficial in social settings that are similar to those in which actual influence situations will occur—i.e., within the sport industry (Ferris et al., 2007; see also social learning theory: Bandura, 1986). As such, internships have the potential to provide students with access to potential role models and mentors within the sport industry, who may be able to aid their development.

Internships can offer opportunities for interaction with managers (or other influential employees within the organization) whose levels of political skill are indicative of organizational or industry expectations; however, this will be contingent upon the quality of the internship, as discussed. More specifically, the opportunity for students to interact with industry professionals. As Ferris et al. (2007) noted, “Effective techniques to develop political skill must provide participants with feedback about their social interactions, including their levels of awareness in social situations, about how well they understand such situations, and about multiple behavioral response alternatives” (pp. 298–299).

This allusion to the internship setting—in this instance, the sport industry—is particularly indicative of the importance of feedback; namely, the opportunity for students to understand the socially situated nature of their behaviors. Feedback here refers to bidirectional observation and interaction between the student and one or more industry professionals (e.g., internship site supervisor). Through this process, students gain insight into organizational culture, and are thus able to become more familiar with the context within which their experiences occur. This is extremely important, as an understanding of organizational culture has been found to positively affect internship success (Frederickson, 2000). The importance of bidirectional observations and interactions is so that a) students are not reliant on their own perceptions of their performance and/or progress; b) industry professionals can provide (and continuing) specific information about students'

interpersonal encounters over time; c) industry professionals can play an active role in developing students' understanding of organizational culture; and d) role mentoring and role modeling become more substantive (Ferris et al., 2007). If political skill can, indeed, be developed (i.e., is not purely trait-based), feedback should be seen as a central component to that process.

Political Skill

Scholarship related to the concept of political skill began during the early 1980s, with the first usage of the term being credited to Pfeffer (1981). According to Liu et al. (2007) politically skilled individuals have the ability to understand and influence social situations to achieve their ends. As students navigate their educational experiences—both prior to and during internships—they acquire, adapt, and refine a number of such skills that equip them for career success. Ferris et al. (2007) provided an exemplar of a politically skilled individual:

Politically skilled individuals combine social astuteness with the capacity to adjust their behavior to different and changing situational demands in a manner that appears to be sincere, inspires support and trust, and effectively influences and controls the responses of others (p. 291–292).

Due to the potentially learned nature of political skill, and its applicability to sport industry settings, its use as a desired outcome of internship experiences makes conceptual sense. There is a dearth of research on the development of political skill, and scholars have instead focused on the outcomes for high/low politically skilled individuals (e.g., others' perception of job performance: Liu et al., 2007; Semadar, Robins, & Ferris, 2006; how political skill affects internship performance ratings: Liu, Ferris, Xu, Weitz, & Perrewé, 2014). However, Ferris, Anthony, Kolodinsky, Gilmore, and Harvey (2002) contributed a book chapter on potential training methods. The authors suggested that, while traditional forms of learning (e.g., classroom) are unlikely to be effective in developing individuals' political skill, other forms of experiential learning (e.g., executive training, and drama-based training) would appear to offer more promise. On this basis, it would appear reasonable to suggest that immersive, situated learning experiences, such as internship experiences, would offer similar promise as a means of developing, or accentuating, political skill—particularly if high quality role modeling and mentoring were possible.

Charting the development of political skill over the course of/as a result of sport management internships would be necessary to operationalize the proposed framework. Quantification of the political skill construct is possible through the use of the Political Skill Inventory (Ferris et al., 2005)—a multidimensional measure comprising four dimensions proposed by Ferris, Davidson, and Perrewé (2005): social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Each of these dimensions is now discussed in relation to sport management internships.

Social astuteness. Politically skilled individuals are able to observe others in social situations, and are attuned to others' perceptions of them. These individuals are extremely self-aware, possessing what Pfeffer (1992) referred to as "sensitivity to others." Accordingly, they are able to select appropriate impression management tactics (see Tedeschi & Reiss, 1981), and can adjust their self-presentations to situational requirements (Ferris et al., 2002). Additionally, those who are socially astute have the ability to recognize the social presentation styles of others, and adapt to facilitate quality interactions (Ferris et al., 2007).

Based on this conceptualization, internship experiences would enable students to increase their levels of social astuteness, as they become more familiar with the types of interactions that they have with others working in the sport industry. Again, the quality of the internship will likely have a profound effect on the development of social astuteness, as feedback provided by role models/mentors will guide revisions of self-presentation in various situations.

Interpersonal influence. Individuals who possess political skill have the ability to influence those with whom they interact or associate; however, interpersonal influence denotes the ability to do so without any type of coercive action. It is thought that those who possess high political skill are able to exert influence by interacting in ways that make others feel comfortable and accommodated. In turn, those people respond in ways that are desired by the politically skilled individual (Pfeffer, 1992).

Exerting influence in interactions within the sport industry will require an understanding of the social norms, and social structures of the organization (or the industry more broadly). As students become more familiar with these facets, their capacity to successfully exert influence on others will presumably increase. This will be contingent upon the extent to which students are exposed to different individuals in the organization through the tasks they are required to perform as part of their internships; thus, it is likely that the quality of internship experiences will affect the extent to which interpersonal influence is developed.

Networking ability. Anecdotally, the ability to network effectively is one of the skills most commonly associated with success in the sport industry. Having the ability to effectively interact with others and develop professional relationships is critical to identifying and realizing the professional opportunities that exist (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1992). As well as the developmental potential of role modeling and mentoring, the professional networks that one develops through their career enables them to utilize the influence of others to improve their own situation (Henning & Jardim, 1977). Politically skilled individuals are able to cultivate new and existing relationships with others, an assertion supported by the findings of Todd, Harris, Harris, and Wheeler (2009). The authors found that networking ability is a primary driver in the relationship between political skill and career success, concluding, "Employees should be cognizant of the importance of their networking skills and should invest time and energy to improve this ability, as well as their actual network of employees" (p. 298).

Depending upon the level or frequency of interactions in which a student is involved during their internship, this dimension of political skill has great scope for development. Prior to internship experiences, it is unlikely that students have substantive experience interacting with industry professionals. While many sport management programs provide some type of professional development training (typically in classroom settings), the practice of networking is likely to place different demands on students. As such, internships in which students meet and interact with various industry professionals will provide considerable developmental opportunities. Again, students' performance in networking scenarios will benefit from the provision of feedback from role mentors, as well as consistent opportunities to observe role models as they engage in networking activities.

Apparent sincerity. When politically skilled individuals interact with others they do so with a level of comfort that enables easy conversation and comfortable communicatory experiences. Those who possess political skill are able to interact effectively because they "appear to others as having high levels of integrity and as being authentic, sincere and genuine" (Ferris et al., 2007, pp. 292–293). Because social influence is one of the goals of political skill, appearing to be sincere and authentic plays a vital role in achieving this end. Conversely, if a person is deemed to be insincere, or as lacking authenticity, they are unlikely to influence those around them.

It is extremely likely that role mentoring will play a crucial role in the development of apparent sincerity, as it is presumed that students will attempt to appear sincere in their interactions with others. In this case, the extent to which they are adjudged to be sincere is dependent upon external perceptions—i.e., those of others. Feedback from mentors, or other industry professionals, will enable students to refine their self-presentations to appear more sincere; thus, it is likely that high quality internships providing bi-directional communication between students and mentors will produce increases in apparent sincerity.

As a perceptual construct, individuals can rate their own political skill, or others can rate them. There are some intuitive issues with making judgments about how one is perceived by others, supported by Meurs, Gallagher, and Perrewé (2010), who reported low correlations between self- and other-ratings of political skill. On this basis, it is advisable that both internship supervisors (i.e., industry professionals) rates students' political skill, in addition to the student themselves. If taken as a self-perception (i.e., student self-rated), the level of political skill that an individual believes he/she has may affect their belief that they are able to complete certain tasks (as indicated by the dashed arrow in Figure 1).

Domain-Specific Self-Efficacy

Domain-specific self-efficacy is a derivative of Self-Efficacy Theory through which Bandura (1977) proposed that behavior is cognitively mediated by the self-efficacy a person holds in relation to the situation. Self-efficacy is defined as the belief a person holds about his ability to perform specific actions in specific situa-

tions and to reach goals; thus, domain specific self-efficacy refers to a person's belief that he can perform specific actions in situations occurring within a particular domain (e.g., the sport industry). Domain-specific self-efficacy has been studied in a number of different vocational settings, such as medicine, law, banking, and education (Pajares, 1996), education (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011), as well as receiving considerable attention in the sport performance literature (Moritz, Feltz, Fahrback, & Mack, 2000), amongst others.

Individuals who possess political skill have been theorized to perceive mastery within the workplace, while also believing they have the ability to influence others (Ferris & Hochwarter, 2011). In essence, those who possess political skill are more likely to feel confident in their ability to accomplish work-related tasks, and manage interpersonal work relationships leading to feelings of self-efficaciousness (Munyon, Summers, Thompson, & Ferris, 2015). Indeed, through meta-analytic techniques, Munyon et al. confirmed a positive relationship between political skill and self-efficacy. As with other internship outcomes, students' belief in their ability to put theory into practice and thus accomplish work related tasks will likely be moderated by the extent to which they were granted opportunities to do so during their internship.

In order to further illustrate the proposed conceptual model and guide future empirical research, the following propositions are offered:

- Proposition 1: There is an interaction of developmental experiences x internship quality on political skill, such that increased internship quality strengthens the positive relationship between developmental experiences and political skill.
- Proposition 2: There is an interaction of developmental experiences x internship quality on domain-specific self-efficacy, such that increased internship quality strengthens the positive relationship between developmental experiences and domain-specific self-efficacy.
- Proposition 3: Political skill is related to domain-specific self-efficacy such that as the level of political skill increases, domain-specific self-efficacy increases.

Sport Industry Identification

The underlying assumption of sport management internships is that participating students desire employment within the sport industry. From a group identity perspective, this is indicative of a desire for membership to a larger group associated with "sport industry employees." To this end, Tajfel (1982) described groups as follows:

A group can be defined as such on the basis of criteria which are either external or internal. External criteria are "outside" designations such as bank clerks, hospital patients, members of trade unions, etc. Internal criteria are those of "group identification." In order to achieve the stage of

“identification,” two components are necessary, and one is frequently associated with them. The two necessary components are: a cognitive one, in the sense of awareness of membership; an evaluative one, in the sense that this awareness is related to some value connotations. The third component consists of an emotional investment in the awareness and evaluations (p. 2).

Identification, therefore, is the perception that one belongs to—or identifies with—a certain group.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) noted that identification is often contingent upon the prestige of the group. For sport management students, the aim is presumably to move toward employment in the sport industry; thus, industry professionals are held in some type of esteem. Indeed, recent commercials for an American for-profit university have used depictions of employees working in stadiums full of sports fans as a principle selling point of their sport management program. The chance to get “close to the action” appears to be incentive enough for many, as we, as instructors who have had direct supervision over students participating in internships, hear anecdotes of students changing bathroom fixtures in sport stadia—without any type of plumbing experience—simply because it afforded them the opportunity to work directly with a professional sports organization; or, getting on a bus to travel multiple hours to work at the Super Bowl without any knowledge of what task they would be involved with upon arrival.

The reality of life as a sport industry employee may result in some interns ceasing to identify with the sport industry, or no longer seeking access to that group. Ultimately, identification as a sport industry employee (or the desire to join that group) will be affected by students’ experiences while completing internships. In this regard, internship quality will have a direct effect on identification, and identification will impact their future intentions to seek employment (see Figure 1).

Here, we can take internship quality to be a different construct to students’ satisfaction with their internship experiences. After all, what could be considered to be a “low quality” experience (e.g., changing lightbulbs) from a developmental perspective could equally be enjoyable. On this basis, internship quality should be ascertained using criteria that are specifically oriented toward the intended learning outcomes. In previous related research, such variables have included autonomy, peer feedback (essential for role modeling and/or mentoring), perceived learning opportunities, social support, supervisor support, and supervisor training (Gamboa et al., 2013). It is advised that—similar to ratings of political skill—student and supervisor-ratings of internship quality be recorded, in addition to supplementary qualitative information that could provide contextual information about individual experiences.

Future Employment Intentions

Future employment intentions refer to the attitudes of sport management students regarding their intentions to work within the sports industry (Cunningham,

Sagas, Dixon, Kent, & Turner, 2005). As noted, those seeking sport management internships can be assumed to have some degree of interest in procuring a job in the industry. This reasoning is consistent with theoretical links between attitudes and behaviors (see Theory of Reasoned Action: Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Theory of Planned Behavior: Ajzen, 1991).

As with employment intentions in other fields of study, the intent to pursue employment in the sport industry can easily be influenced by positive and negative internship experiences. In their discussion of bachelor level nursing students, Courtney, Edwards, Smith, and Finlayson (2002) found that the specifics of a clinical placement can change the employment intentions of students in the program. Specifically, the authors found that students who had clinical placements in rural settings can affect the likelihood of seeking employment in rural settings in a positive manner.

Internship coordinators should evaluate sport management students' employment intentions post-internship; however, decreasing intentions do not necessarily indicate a low quality internship. Some students may find that they are not suited to the industry, even after completing a high quality internship. Accepting this, it is likely that positive experiences will result in continued or developed identification.

As with the development of political skill, and domain-specific self-efficacy, the following propositions are offered to further illustrate the relationships contained in the model:

- Proposition 4: There is an interaction of developmental experiences x internship quality on sport industry identification, such that increased internship quality strengthens the positive relationship between developmental experiences and sport industry identification.
- Proposition 5: There is an interaction of developmental experiences x internship quality on future employment intentions, such that increased internship quality strengthens the positive relationship between developmental experiences and future employment intentions.
- Proposition 6: Sport industry identification is related to future employment intentions such that, as sport industry identification increases, future employment intentions increase.

Having defined and discussed the components of the conceptual model and their relationship to one another, the authors discuss its applied implications for sport management students, internship coordinators, and sport organizations offering internship opportunities.

Contributions, Implications, and Future Directions

In the present paper, the authors propose a conceptual model that links sport management students' developmental experiences and internship quality to the development of political skill, and three secondary outcomes (i.e., domain-specific

ic self-efficacy, sport industry identification, and future employment intentions). In doing so, a comprehensive method for evaluating the effectiveness of internships is offered.

Given that internships have become a central (and often mandatory) component of sport management degree programs, the effectiveness of internships must be measured against criteria that are student-focused, and pertain to the alleged aims of the endeavor. This represents a departure from past evaluations of student internships that have either focused on organization-focused outcomes (e.g., Sturgis, Verstegen, Randolph, & Garvin, 1980), or students' career exploration (e.g., Gamboa et al., 2013). Internship programs create important links between universities and sports organizations, but students' development must be prioritized over their utility to organizations.

The political skill construct is excellently placed to encapsulate the type of development that internships purport to deliver. Through the development of their social astuteness, networking ability, apparent sincerity, and interpersonal influence, students are equipped to be successful in their prospective careers. As Ferris et al. (2007) note, this will be contingent upon their engagement with industry mentors and role models who invest in their applied education. By acknowledging that not all internships are equal (i.e., some are higher quality than others), we can begin to assess the specific outcomes that different experiences produce.

Recommendations for Future Research

The conceptual model should be used to test the propositions presented herein. Empirical evidence is needed to better understand the extent of the positive effects of engaging in high quality internships, and equally, the potentially negative effects of low quality internships. This information can be extremely instructive for program directors and internship coordinators as they allocate their resources toward certain industry partnerships.

A potential empirical study would ideally entail multiple data points (i.e., pre and post-internship) for political skill, in addition to secondary outcome variables. A quantitative measure of political skill (the Political Skill Inventory: PSI) was validated by Ferris et al. (2005), and has since been used in a number of studies in management (e.g., Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007) and sport contexts (e.g., Treadway et al., 2014). It is proposed that internship quality would be assessed at the conclusion of the internship using the Internship Quality Inventory (IQI: Gamboa, 2011). The subscales of the IQI (autonomy, peer feedback, social support, learning opportunities, supervisor training, and supervisor support) align well with the elements required for political skill development suggested by Ferris et al. (2007) (e.g., feedback on social interactions). As such, the use of the IQI with the PSI for academic study of internships and administrative evaluations is recommended.

Conclusion

The popularity of sport management degree programs is partially due to the internship experiences that are offered. Students relish the opportunity to gain on-the-job training for their desired future careers, yet the assumption that all experiences are educational and developmental should be challenged. By providing a conceptual model of the relationship between developmental experiences, internship quality, and political skill, the authors offer a means of evaluating internships with students—as opposed to organizations—in mind. In proposing the political skill construct as a primary means of assessing development, the authors bring an oft-used concept from the Management literature into the realm of sport management.

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