The Engaged Learner: Undergraduate Research and the Super Bowl

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The Engaged Learner: Undergraduate Research and the Super Bowl

Laudable attempts within the sport management discipline, such as the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) Teaching & Learning Fair and the Sport Management Education Journal (SMEJ), have been made to enhance and showcase how research and teaching ideally should be intertwined. Further, COSMA (Commission on Sport Management Accreditation, 2022) lists *research/undergraduate research* as an "Innovation" under its Common Professional Component (undergraduate only) within their accreditation manual. This is not surprising considering many agree that the main difference between undergraduate and graduate academic models within sport management "are the degree of research involvement" (Kelley et al., 1994, p. 95). Undergraduate research continues to be noted as a "high-impact practice" by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), while student involvement in research has been shown to positively impact student retention and academic performance (Jones et al., 2010; Lanning & Brown, 2019), in addition to fostering campus engagement (Kuh, 2012).

In addition to research as an innovative component to the sport management curriculum, COSMA (2022) places a heavy emphasis on the importance of delivering experiential learning opportunities, "integrating knowledge and theory with practical application and skill development" (p. 57) as an essential part of students' educational experience. Comparable to the benefits of student involvement in research, many scholars have discovered that providing experiential education can have a significant positive impact on practical experience, professional development, real-world application, collaboration among students, student retention, and learning outcomes (e.g., Burke et al., 2013; Chalip, 1997; Malouf, 2003; Eyler, 2009; Judge et al., 2011; Pierson & Troppe, 2010). Eagleman and McNary's (2010) comprehensive analysis of

227 U.S. undergraduate sport management programs' 21-common course offerings included an experiential education course; however, a research course was *not* included. More recently, Miller et al. (2023) conducted an additional comprehensive curriculum review of the 403 undergraduate sport management programs in the country. While the authors found no significant changes to the sport management curriculum as it pertains to core curriculum requirements analyzed in 2010 (e.g., introduction to sport management (82.7%), Sport Marketing (83.9%), Sport Facility Management 77.7%), they discovered that 15.3% or roughly 61 sport management programs required a research/statistic course (Miller et al., 2023). With the minor increase of diverse course offerings in the sport management curriculum, it is timely to consider innovative and strategic curriculum approaches that would benefit all sport management students (Corr & Stokowski, 2023). Because of the emphasis on experiential learning, a unique opportunity exists for sport management educators. Student mega event experiences are sought-after and limited experiences in that educators can be highly selective of the students that will represent their university at these events. Each year mega event opportunities, such as the NFL Super Bowl, provide a rich and high-profile space for students to experience, observe, and investigate the sport industry. It is an attractive annual real-world experience for active and deep student learning that is somewhat unique to the sport management discipline. Therefore, the purpose of this work is to put forth a pedagogical strategy of leveraging an experiential learning opportunity to successfully implement an undergraduate research component within sport management curricula.

Experiential Learning and Undergraduate Research in Sport Management Strategy

From a sport management perspective, experiential learning opportunities are found in curriculums across globe (Foster & Pierce, 2021; Miller et al., 2023). While internships are the

most common form of experiential learning, scholars have continued to highlight the varied outcomes and downsides to semester-long internships (McClean et al., 2020; Odio et al., 2014; Odio & Kerwin, 2016). More varied and shorter-term experiences have been found to be more inclusive and advantageous (Hayes Sauder & Mudrick, 2018; Odio et al., 2022; Springer et al., 2020). Sport management researchers also have begun to establish ways to increase student outcomes within experiential learning opportunities (e.g., Dees & Hall, 2012; Foster & Pierce, 2021; Spence et al., 2009; Williams & Parker, 2016). However, opportunities to further enhance these experiences through exposing undergraduates to the research process can add even greater credibility to the importance of these opportunities. As sport management educators, it is important to find ways to model and demonstrate the value of research in the classroom and throughout our teaching. While the commitment to teaching students to become good consumers of research is inherently embedded in our traditional courses, finding ways to actively involve undergraduate students in the research process can be challenging. Because experiential learning opportunities are so common within sport management curriculum and the opportunities to work major sporting events are limited and selective, an opportunity exists to leverage the appeal and prestige of working a major sporting event (i.e., Super Bowl, Olympics, World Cup) with an undergraduate research component. That is, tying a research project to a high-demand and sought after experiential opportunity can help elevate the importance of research with sport management education.

Aligned with Cohen and Nite's (2019) recommendation on increasing experiential learning effectiveness by "allowing students some type of 'say' in the direction and mission of the class" (p. 7), we propose combining a student-directed participatory action research project with an experiential learning opportunity at a major event, as pedagogical strategy to successfully

advance undergraduate research knowledge within sport management curricula. For example, prior to the event, students can discuss potential research questions of interests related to the event, such as marketing and the recall of sponsors or tourism and the average tourist spending. This can help ensure students' interests are driving the course and increase student learning in an experiential event management field experience (i.e., Super Bowl LVII Event Management) through the addition of a student-involved research project. Importantly, embedding a research component within a course can provide greater opportunities for faculty mentorship (Baker et al., 2019; Stokowski et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2022), expand students' skill set and confidence in research (Jones et al., 2010; Linn et al., 2015; Russell et al., 2007), provide funding opportunities through undergraduate research mechanisms[1], and likely enhance the reflective learning and knowledge gained through the experience.

Participatory Action Research

Action research is an ideal tool for future sport managers because of its focus on combining theory and practice by attempting to solve a real-world problem and bring about organizational improvement or change (e.g., Afify, 2008; Chalip, 1997). Action research is also collaborative in that it includes the participants, practitioners, or clients in the process (e.g., Coghlan, 2007; Grønhaug & Olson, 1999; Rich & Misener, 2017). Thus, an action research approach will place the students in a dual role, creating the research questions, which address real-world problems of interest, and serving as participants in the research project. Additionally, these roles can help students with networking and building their confidence and self-efficacy as a

[1] Acknowledgements: ECU's Office of Research, Economic Development and Engagement (REDE) provided funding support for Super Bowl LVII and this project.

future practitioner. Ultimately, an action research approach pinpoints how research advances both knowledge and practice.

The goal of participatory action research is to uncover experiential knowledge from the participants' perspective. This research approach is ideal as participatory action research requires that the researcher (i.e., faculty) "demystify the research process" (Frisby et al., 2005, p. 368) and "involves research participants developing skills in collecting, analyzing, and utilizing data" (Frisby et al., 2005, p. 370). The participatory approach is reflexive and rebalances researcher-participant power dynamics (Rich & Misener, 2017; i.e., faculty-student) in that research is done "with" participants. Thus, this approach can reveal important insight students would not gather otherwise, while reaping the known benefits of undergraduate research and fostering faculty mentor relationships (e.g., Lanning & Brown, 2019; Linn et al., 2015; O'Donnell et al., 2015).

Implementation-Leveraging Experiential Learning with an Undergraduate Research Component

The planning phase for the experiential learning opportunity and spring course took place in the beginning of the prior semester. Students were required to apply for the 3-credit special topic course (i.e., KINE 4003 Super Bowl LVII Major Sport Experience) by September 1st. Undergraduate students were selected based on an application, which requested GPA, an interest essay, and required the name of faculty member that would recommend them for the experience. Selected students were then enrolled in the course, and a course fee was set up to cover expenses (e.g., lodging, travel, etc.). This enabled students to use financial aid and apply for other support.

For the experiential portion of the course, we planned for students to volunteer at Super Bowl LVII in Phoenix, AZ over seven days (two travel days). Students were required to

volunteer for at least three events over five days (i.e., Super Bowl Experience, Sponsor Welcome Events, NFL Outdoor Festivals, On-Location Hospitality Events, or Super Bowl Sunday). In addition to mandatory shifts for the Super Bowl, students could attend a sport management student networking event. The event included a Q&A panel of local sport leaders, round table discussions among sport management students from 20 different colleges and universities and a stadium tour (Chase Field) facilitated by current interns at the Arizona Diamondbacks. Working around shifts and/or off days, faculty planned for students to meet with local sport organizations, where they would receive facility tours and meet with staff to learn about their backgrounds, what their position entails, and insider information about the events that take place. The logistics for the experiential portion will vary based on the mega sporting event.

For the pedagogical portion of the course faculty set up the course by first determining the five major learning objectives: (1) Demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the details involved in planning and designing a major sporting event, while also researching the economic, social, political, and environmental effects of a major sporting event on a host destination; (2) Explain the complexity and wide-ranging scope, role and purposes served by key players involved with the event and sport industry; (3) Evaluate and locate primary and secondary sources related to mega sporting events, while also synthesizing and critically analyzing the research; (4) Define and design research questions, develop hypotheses, create an ethical research design, and collect data for an IRB approved research study; and (5) Analyze, evaluate, synthesize, organize, and interpret data for the research study.

With these learning objectives in mind, we then set up the 14-week course with learning modules. We utilized five modules for the course: (1) introduction to research, (2) peer review literature and writing, (3) research design and proposal, (4) event experience and data collection,

and (5) data analysis. Table 1 provides an outline of an experiential learning course with an undergraduate research component, suggested topics, and assignments, learning objective attained by week, and educator notes. The timeline can be interchangeable based on the mega sporting event date(s).

In the first module, Introduction to Research, we provided an overview of research process, university policies for student travel, and the students completed the university's IRB training and a library orientation. During the second module, Peer Review Literature and Writing, we focused on helping students become more familiar with reading peer-reviewed research and scholarly writing. Having students write and present whitepapers on a peer-reviewed article related to mega events was an effective approach. In whitepapers students are asked to state the (a) purpose of the research article, (b) importance of the issue, (c) identify audience/stakeholders, (d) issues/motivation/reason for the study, (e) explain results, (f) conduct an analysis on why it is important for sport managers, and (g) create discussion questions and implication questions for the class to consider. The goals of both writing and presenting the whitepapers were to help students understand the usefulness of research, identify the problem authors intend to solve, and focus on practical application of research. After week-three, collectively the class then developed an annotated bibliography related to mega events. Through this, students discovered their research interests and commonalties in peer-reviewed articles and topics selected. For example, some students chose peer-reviewed articles on volunteering at a mega event while others chose articles related to fan/consumer behaviors at a mega event.

Next, in the Research Design and Proposal module, students applied the collective annotated bibliography to begin creating a research proposal. In most instances, your university IRB proposal can be used as a guide for students to follow. Because university's IRB approvals

operate on varying timelines, it may not be feasible to submit the proposal. However, we suggest that the process of creating a research proposal is a valuable learning experience. After the proposal is completed, the Event Experience & Data Collection module takes place. Depending upon your institution's IRB and if an actual IRB proposal was submitted and approved, this module will vary. In our case, the faculty received IRB approval and students collected data on experiential learning outcomes from other university students volunteering at the Super Bowl. Dependent on the university, and if the results are intended to be published, instructors could start the proposal earlier (i.e., the semester prior) or collect data internally with the understanding data collection is not intended to be published and for student learning purposes. In the final module, Data Analysis, after the instructor provided an overview of qualitative data analysis, students analyzed the data collected in small groups. This process involved identifying, coding, and discussing common themes from the open-ended responses until 100% agreement was met. Each student group submitted a results and discussion section as their final paper. Because of the participatory action research approach, this final paper required the typical student reflection, but the additional data analysis process enhanced the student learning and the depth of the reflection.

Student Feedback on Addition of a Research Component

After grades were posted for the course that included a 5-day volunteer experience at Super Bowl LVII and a research component, students were asked for their feedback on the research component of the course via email to the instructor. The students did not provide any negative comments, except for the pace of Introduction to Research module. But they did note that tying a research component to the course aided in the reflection that was done while at the event *and* after. Students noted that "the research component made me reflect more on the event and our experiences" (M. King, personal communication, May 1, 2023) and helped "brainstorm

ways to discuss my experience in a more dignified professional way within my career" (M. McInnis, personal communication, May 1, 2023). While another student added, "I truly believe that doing the research portion of the project helped me remember the synopsis of the trip in a more professional manner. It enlightened me to some strengths and weaknesses that I may or may not have known" (T. Burnham, personal communication, May 1, 2023). "Being able to discuss our trip through our research findings was very helpful. The research allowed us to look over the amazing trip and truly understand what it did for us as individuals. The research 100 percent helped the reflection part of the class" (S. Cooper, personal communication, May 2, 2023).

All ten undergraduate students indicated it was their first exposure to actively engaging with research and saw the benefit for future students. For example, "Keep the research component. It helped me reflect more on my experience . . . Keeping the research component is also helpful for students who have not had any experience with research" (M. Hood, personal communication, May 1, 2023). One student stated, "I believe the research component of the class should be kept because it gives us an insight to how a research project is run, start to finish. The literature review gave us an insight as to subjects of our choice and how they were related to the experience we were about to embark upon" (M. Hudson, personal communication, May 2, 2023). Other students noted that they feel better prepared for what to expect in graduate school because of the research component within the course. "The research part of this class was beneficial because it let us see how others felt about the experience and also introduced me to how research works, which I was happy about because I know a big part of graduate school is research" (Q. Willard, personal communication, May 1, 2023). "The research portion also exposed me to how

to conduct research . . . in a way I could understand firsthand by being a part of the research" (K. McDade, personal communication, May 1, 2023).

Student feedback clearly positioned the research component as vital to the experience. "I do think that the research portion of this class helped me gain a more professional outlook on the events that took place on our trip. I view the research portion of this class as an important part of the whole experience" (N. Trevino, personal communication, May 1, 2023). And perhaps most fitting and relevant, another student added, how this could serve as a catalyst to encourage more faculty to consider these opportunities.

> A research component to the class was a good idea and should be kept-- it [can] encourage faculty and maybe even other universities [to see] why it's a good idea to participate in these experiences. With my personal experience, many saw it as a fun adventure and didn't see the hard work as well as the life skills and professional skills gained in this trip. I believe having a research component shows the need for something like this in every department at universities. (A. Lucido, personal communication, May 1, 2023)

Chalip et al. (2010) noted the importance of finding a common purpose among academic disciplines. While Chalip and colleagues were primarily interested in addressing the sport and recreation divide and encouraging academic programs to no longer operate in silos, as a discipline, it is vital that sport management faculty continue to find ways that demonstrate our common purpose within higher education. We can do this by bridging research and practice for our students and by rethinking curriculum design and innovative practices that can be adopted

across campus. Leveraging experiential learning with an undergraduate research component is one way to do that.

Many universities' Course-based Undergraduate Research Experiences (*CUREs*) will show very few (if any) social science courses are included and the need for offerings beyond laboratory science (Shanahan et al., 2015). Combining this with Robinson's (2019) findings on the preferred learning style of sport management students and innovative and strategic curriculum (Corr & Stokowski, 2023), we argue sport management faculty are uniquely positioned to demonstrate how research and teaching can and should be better intertwined. Robinson's results revealed that 42% of sport management students prefer kinesthetic learning. "Kinesthetic learners generally excel in situations where they can apply course content in case studies, action research, and consulting projects and simulation activities" (Weese, 2022, p. 196). Because sport management faculty encounter many kinesthetic learners, educators can further student success by fusing research and experiential learning. We advance that this can be accomplished by redesigning and leveraging a mega sporting event experience by adding a research component and highlighting the importance undergraduate research with sport management coursework.

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Table 1

Semester Outline of Undergraduate Sport Management Experiential Learning with a Research Component

Module		Week	Topic/Assignment	Learning Objective	Notes
1	Introduction to Research	1	Overview of Research Process, University Policies for Student Travel, and Library Orientation	1, 2	Review of syllabus, course schedule, and overview of course (travel and volunteer experience), and university policies for travel. Begin to expose students to the research process and comprehensive knowledge of major sporting events. Students will learn how to conduct research reviews using the resources through the university's library system.
	Introduction to Research	2	Research Review & IRB Training	3, 4	Students will begin to locate primary, and second sources related to mega sporting events. Students will begin and successfully complete/pass IRB training, learning to create ethical research design.
2	Peer Review Literature and Writing	3	White Paper #1 & Presentation	1, 2, 3	Reviewing Literature – Students select a peer-reviewed scholarly research paper of interest related to a major sporting event (resources, budgets, economic, political, and environmental effects on host city) and write a white paper. Students will then present their white paper to the class each week. After the three-week research period, collectively the class will develop an annotated bibliography. Students will discover research interests and commonalties in peer-reviewed articles and topics. Writing - There will be heavy emphasis on clear, concise, and
	Peer Review Literature and Writing	4	White Paper #2 & Presentation	1, 2, 3	
	Peer Review Literature and Writing	5	White Paper #3 & Presentation	1, 2, 3	

					accurate writing in written submission.
3	Research Design and Proposal	6	Finalize research questions (survey, interviews, focus groups, etc.).	2, 3, 4	Students will begin to create an ethical research design proposal.
	Research Design and Proposal	7	Research Design	2, 3, 4	Students will compose the introduction, literature review, and methodology for the research study.
	Research Design and Proposal	8	Research Design	2, 3, 4	Collectively submit research proposal to University IRB.
4	Event Experience & Data Collection	9	Experiential Learning & Data Collection	1, 2, 4	*Travel and Volunteer at Mega Sporting Event *(Interchangeable)*
	Event Experience & Data Collection	10	Network & Data Collection	1, 2, 4, 5	Students follow up with peers and professional contacts created during the event experience. Students will follow-up with data collection via email to fellow peers.
	Event Experience & Data Collection	11	Network & Data Collection	1, 2, 4, 5	Students will analyze data (or dependent upon design/methodology, follow-up on data collection if needed).
5	Data Analysis	12	Data Collection (Groups)	1, 2, 4, 5	Following the event, students begin/continue to analyze data in small groups. This would be highly dependent upon the data collected.

	Data Analysis	13	Compose Results (Groups)	1, 2, 4, 5	Students will begin writing results in their selected groups. Students will collectively focus on one specific research question or hypothesis.
	Data Analysis	14	Final Paper & Presentation (Groups)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Each group will submit their results and discussion as their final paper.

Course Learning Objectives	
1	Demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge of the details involved in planning and designing a major sporting event, while also researching the economic, social, political, and environmental effects of a major sporting event on a host destination.
2	Explain the complexity and wide-ranging scope, role and purposes served by key players involved with the event and sport industry.
3	Evaluate and locate primary and secondary sources related to mega sporting events, while also synthesizing and critically analyzing the research.
4	Define and design research questions, develop hypothesis, create ethical research design, and collect data for an IRB approved research study.
5	Analyze, evaluate, synthesize, organize, and interpret data for the research study.

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