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Student Employee Recruitment and Retention Through Campus Partnerships

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Student employees play a critical role in the operation of student recreation centers. One of the challenges faced by many recreational sports departments is the ongoing need to recruit and retain these student employees. Recruitment can be done through word of mouth, current employee referrals, and on-campus advertising. Retention can be accomplished through competitive pay rates, flexible work hours, a challenging and exciting work environment, and opportunities to advance, among other strategies (Cheladurai, 1999). Recruitment and retention are important considerations for any recreational sports department, large or small, because student employees have an enormous impact on both the quantity and quality of programs and services offered by the department.

This article proposes a strategy for establishing partnerships with academic departments to aid in the recruitment and retention of student employees. These collaborative partnerships have the ability to benefit students, the recreational sports department, academic departments, and university student retention efforts. This article outlines how to establish and implement these relationships and proposes several possible partnerships between recreational sports and various academic departments. Following a description of this strategy is an example of a partnership that has been successfully established at one Midwestern university.

Key Words: internships, recreational sports, human resource management

Many recreational sports departments have developed successful student employee recruitment and retention strategies based on sound human resource management practices. These strategies include recruiting students through word of mouth, current employee referrals, and on-campus advertising. Retention efforts often focus on competitive pay rates, flexible work hours, opportunities for advancement, and a work environment that offers student employees the ability to develop and enhance job related skills, such

as decision making, communication, and people skills (Chelladurai, 1999; Lussier & Kimball, 2004). A key consideration when developing a student employee recruitment and retention strategy is the necessity for a mutually beneficial relationship between student employees and the recreational sports department. This two-way exchange, in which the student benefits by gaining transferable job skills and the recreational sports department benefits by gaining a committed student workforce, can be further strengthened with the involvement of a third campus group.

In this article, we suggest that this third but often overlooked group consists of the faculty members of various academic departments on campus, particularly those in the areas of management, education, and communication. This article describes a strategy for developing and implementing relationships with academic departments and includes an example of a successful partnership created at one Midwestern university between the sport management program and the athletic marketing department.

Mutually Beneficial Relationships

Student employees are a vital component of the recreational sports departments in which they are employed. In addition to contributing to the daily operations and activities of the student recreation center, student employees provide the department with a student (customer) perspective of the department's programs and services. As both customer and employee, student employees provide credibility for the department and can assist with promotional activities directed toward the general student body (Chelladurai, 1999). Students benefit from being employed in recreational sports departments because they are able to work in jobs on-campus, often saving or eliminating travel time between work and school. Students have the opportunity to work directly with their peers and to gain valuable administrative skills as they assume leadership roles (e.g., intramural officials, club sport officers, lifeguards, aerobic instructors, personal trainers) in recreational sports departments.

Additional benefits for student employees accrue when a recreational sports department partners with an academic department to provide volunteer and/or internship opportunities for students. The structured involvement of an academic department in the process of student employee recruitment and retention creates a linkage between academic coursework and practical experience in a student's chosen field. This allows the student's work experience to have direct application to her or his career aspirations through the development of specific and valuable professional skills.

Students benefit from this partnership between recreational sports and an academic department by gaining valuable work experience in their area of study while at the same time learning in an organized and professional work environment. The recreational sports department has access to a motivated supply of student workers and built-in accountability since student

volunteers and interns are working for academic credit. Faculty benefit because students are able to fulfill coursework requirements, including field and internship experiences.

From the perspective of university administrators, departmental and university-wide collaborations are an important component of efforts to increase student retention (Hyman, 1995; Brotherton, 2001). Many universities are increasing their efforts to link academic departments and programs with student services units as a means of creating a campus-wide community that supports students. In addition, it is important to engage students in the campus community from their first year on campus.

According to Tinto (1993), first year students account for approximately one-third of all students in public institutions who leave school before graduation. There is some evidence that the recreational sports department already plays an important role in the retention of first year students. Belch, Gebel, and Maas (2001) demonstrated that first year students at a public institution who used the student recreation complex were retained at a greater rate than those students who did not use the recreation complex. Moreover, Light (2001) argues that for college students a “substantial commitment” to activities outside of the classroom, including volunteering and work, “has little or no relationship to grades...[but] do have a strong relationship to overall satisfaction with college life.” Volunteering or interning with the recreational sports department, especially for students with an interest in the management, marketing, or programming of recreation, health, and sport services, might provide a similar effect on student retention and satisfaction.

At one Midwestern university, a structured relationship between the sport management program and the athletic marketing department has been in place for several years. The development of this formal relationship was implemented in an effort to create a collaborative partnership to benefit both departments as well as the sport management students. Figure 1 depicts the interrelatedness of this partnership among students, academic programs, and the recreational sports department.

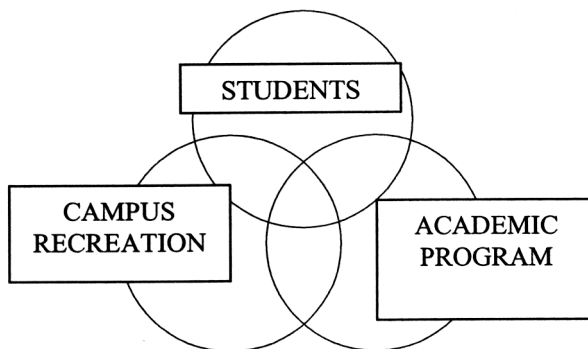


Figure 1 — On-Campus Collaborative Partnerships

This type of relationship can be established with a wide variety of academic programs on campus, depending on the needs of the recreational sports department. Many academic departments, particularly those housed in the professional schools—education, engineering, and business—actively seek co-op, volunteer, and internship experiences for their students. What follows is a description of the steps required by the recreational sports department to implement a proactive strategy of student recruitment and retention through campus partnerships with academic departments.

Strategy Implementation

The first step and key to developing a relationship between the recreational sports department and several academic programs is to designate a representative who will act as the coordinator of the program. Developing these initial relationships requires a considerable amount of time and energy. The representative should be a member of the recreational sports staff or other designated person who has the time, energy, and necessary skills to network with academic programs on campus.

This representative must be able to effectively communicate the recreational sports department's mission and two other critical pieces of information. First, what role does the recreational sports department have in contributing to the retention and overall development of students? Second, how does an internship, volunteer experience, or job in the recreational sports department enhance the job-related skills of students from that specific department? An answer to the first question can only be crafted if the recreational sports department has assessed and developed a clear understanding of their role in student retention and development efforts. Answering the second question requires familiarity with the programs in an academic department and an understanding of the careers students are likely to pursue after graduation.

Once a recreational sports department representative has been chosen and the recreational sports staff has clearly outlined its mission and role in student development, the department representative, in consultation with other staff members, should compile a list of department needs related to student employment. The list should include ongoing programs and activities as well as upcoming special events. In addition, the department representative should generate a list of staff members who are willing to volunteer their time to speak to various academic classes on behalf of the recreational sports department. Table 1 illustrates possible linkages between the recreational sports department and various academic programs.

Before approaching members of the academic community, the department representative should prepare to answer a few additional questions that might arise during discussions with department chairs or faculty:

- How much will the faculty/staff member have to do to ensure a successful internship or volunteer experience for her/his students?

Table 1 Campus Recreation Department/Academic Program Linkages

Recreation Department	Academic Program
Director of Recreation	Recreation, Physical Education, Health, Sport Management, Management, Marketing, Human Resource Management, Decision Sciences, Finance, Communication, School Psychology
Facility Operations	Operations Management, Civil/Environmental Engineering, Criminal Justice
Sport Clubs	Recreation, Exercise Science, Physical Education, Health, Sport Management, Management, Marketing, Communication, School Psychology
Sponsorship/Marketing	Recreation, Sport Management, Communication, Marketing
Aquatics Director	Recreation, Sport Management, Exercise Science, Health, Physical Education, Special Education, Therapeutic Recreation
Wellness/Fitness	Biology, Chemistry, Premedical, Physical Therapy, Dietetics, Nutrition, Exercise Science, Health, Recreation, Therapeutic Recreation, Special Education, Women's Studies
Intramurals	Recreation, Physical Education, Health, Sport Management, Teacher Education, School Counseling, Community Counseling, School Psychology, Educational Leadership
Adapted Recreation	Recreation, Health, Teacher Education, Physical Education, Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Therapeutic Recreation
Finance/Development	Accounting, Economics, Finance
Family Programming, Summer Camps	Recreation, Health, Sport Management, Sociology, Teacher Education, Management, Physical Education, Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Therapeutic Recreation
Outdoor Recreation	Recreation, Educational Leadership, Teacher Education, Physical Education, Management, Sport Management, Human Resource Management, Special Education, Therapeutic Recreation, Early Childhood Education, Criminal Justice

- How will the faculty/staff member benefit from this collaboration with the recreational sports department?
- How will this project and/or experience contribute to enhancing the out-of-classroom experiences of students in this academic major?

Preparing answers to these questions will demonstrate that the recreational sports representative is interested in creating collaborative relationships that will benefit not only the recreational sports department but students and faculty as well.

Once the program has a foundation in the recreational sports department, networking and developing contacts with faculty and staff across campus is the next step in the process. Using existing contacts is the easiest way to begin this step. Scan membership and program activity lists to identify the faculty and staff members who currently participate in recreational sports programs. Many recreational sports departments also have advisory committees that represent various campus groups. These advisory committees generally consist of student, faculty, and staff representatives from various campus groups (i.e., undergraduate student government, faculty senate, and graduate student council). These individuals are the members of the academic community who are most familiar with the recreational sports program and can become advocates for the department to the rest of the campus community.

After identifying faculty and staff contacts from various academic departments, the next step in the process involves having the recreational sports representative set up meetings to discuss potential volunteer and internship experiences. Meetings with faculty and staff members should begin with a discussion of the requirements students must meet for degree credit in a particular academic program. Often students are required to participate in internship or field experiences, and employment or volunteer opportunities in the recreational sports department can serve as the vehicle for these experiences.

Successful matching of students to internship experiences or employment in the recreational sports department is not the end of the relationship building process. Internship experiences generally include an on-site visit from the internship supervisor, weekly or monthly reports written by the intern, and formative as well as summative evaluations of the intern by the on-site supervisor. The recreational sports representative should schedule an end of the term or end of the year meeting with each faculty member to evaluate the success of the internship and volunteer experiences, using input from students, recreational sports staff, and internship supervisors. All parties involved in these partnerships must be committed to ongoing communication that ensures these collaborative relationships are maintained from year to year.

The ongoing collaborative relationship described in the next section is a partnership between an academic program (sport management) and the athletic marketing department at one Midwestern university. This partner-

ship has been in place for several years and has provided numerous students with the opportunity to gain academic credit for coursework and internship experiences. Similar types of volunteer and internship experiences are available in recreational sports departments. For example, many recreational sports departments conduct one- or multiple-day events and programs, e.g., intramural tournaments, swim-a-thons, fitness/conditioning competitions, summer camps, and Special Olympics, which require a considerable amount of marketing to the campus and local community as well significant numbers of volunteers and employees.

A University Academic/Athletic Department Partnership

A significant goal of the sport management program discussed in this example is to provide practical work experience in each year of the student's academic study. During their first year, sport management students are required to work three events for the athletic marketing department to gain course credit toward their Introduction to Sport Management course grade. At these events, sport management students assist the marketing staff with game-day promotional activities. Compiling a master list of recreational sports department programs and events by the department representative would allow students who are interested in working for the recreational sports department to choose several events throughout a semester or quarter to complete their course credit.

As second year students, sport management majors enroll in a practicum course where a four-hour-a-week volunteer experience with a sport organization is mandatory. While they have the option to gain this experience with any sport organization approved by the instructor, these students are often recruited to work in the athletic department. Student volunteers typically rotate among two or three departments such as marketing, ticketing, facility operations, compliance, or sports information throughout the semester. Students opting to work for a recreational sports department could rotate among the different program areas including intramurals, sport clubs, fitness, informal recreation, facility operations, and marketing.

Sport management students who have previously assisted with athletic department events become eligible for paid positions in the athletic marketing department during their third year in the program. In the recreational sports department, students who complete their introductory coursework and have volunteered previously for the department could be given expanded job responsibilities. For example, these additional responsibilities might include organizing, scheduling, and promoting a special event, intramural league, or fitness class.

By the time sport management students are seniors, they are given extensive projects and responsibilities such as creating and implementing

their own promotion for a specific sport or assisting with special projects. These highly qualified students are often given the opportunity to become athletic department interns. The athletic department representative, student, and faculty member supervising the internship coordinate the experience to ensure that it is within degree requirement guidelines (i.e., amount of hours, research projects). Similar involvement by the recreational sports department representative, student, and faculty supervisor would be required to ensure a successful recreational sports department internship.

Finally, although the primary goal is for students to gain valuable job-related skills from these in-depth internships, it is also important to encourage staff members to become mentors to these student interns. These mentoring relationships are invaluable to students as they begin the next phase of their career development. Mentors can provide letters of reference, as well as career and professional advice regarding graduate education and assistantships, membership in professional organizations, attendance at industry conferences, and most importantly, networking opportunities through their own professional contacts.

Conclusion

The student volunteer/internship program discussed in this article succeeds because of ongoing communication, assessment, and “tweaking” of the program by the athletic department and sport management representatives. The process of creating such a program can seem daunting at first because of the amount of planning, time, and effort needed to establish the program. An appropriate way to begin the program might be to initially approach one academic department and to develop a collaborative relationship with that department before approaching others. The most obvious first choices would be a sport studies or kinesiology department that would contain sport management, recreation/leisure studies, exercise science, and/or physical education programs.

Recreational sports departments in universities that do not have these types of programs can still coordinate their student volunteer and internship efforts with other academic departments. There could be interest in creating a program such as this one for marketing, communication, finance, or management students. Since these linkages might not be as obvious as creating a partnership with a sport management or recreation/leisure studies program, more lobbying efforts might be required by the recreational sports department representative or director. In addition, well-established goals, outcomes, and assessment of this type of student volunteer/internship program can assist the recreational sports department to substantiate how this program is beneficial to students. No matter how large or small a recreational sports department, there is likely an academic program seeking to provide their students valuable on-campus experience in their chosen field.

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