



P-ISSN: 2394-1685
E-ISSN: 2394-1693
Impact Factor (ISRA): 5.38
IJPESH 2021; 8(5): 05-10
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www.kheljournal.com
Received: 04-07-2021
Accepted: 06-08-2021

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Big opportunity: Motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of student volunteers at an NCAA division I conference basketball tournament

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of 12 undergraduate sport management student volunteers at the 2018 Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament, a major intercollegiate sporting event held at Madison Square Garden. Based on the contemporary nature of the phenomenon, a qualitative exploratory case study method was utilized. Data were gathered from pre-event questionnaires, site observations, and post-event semi-structured interviews.

Findings indicate that students were motivated to volunteer by a desire to build their resumes, to engage in networking, to gain practical experience, and due to the unique nature of the opportunity. Emergent themes related to the students' experience referenced gaining insight into career direction, networking, and a dissatisfaction with the orientation process. Finally, analysis revealed that participants were highly satisfied with the overall experience, but they also offered suggestions to improve upon the experience.

Keywords: big ten, volunteering, experiential learning, motivation

Introduction

As the field of sport management continues to grow and evolve, there has been a movement to integrate experiential learning opportunities into the undergraduate curriculum (Hardy, 1987; Southall, *et al.*, 2003) ^[17, 27]. While a great deal of research has investigated the concepts of motivations of sport management student learning and experiential learning, little research exists combining the concepts (Pate & Shonk, 2015) ^[24]. Further, VanSickle, Pierce, and Diacin (2015) ^[30] write that there is a gap in the sport management literature related to the satisfaction of volunteers at large sporting events. Therefore, this study sought to examine the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of 12 student volunteers at the 2018 Big Ten Men's Basketball Tournament, an intercollegiate sporting event held at Madison Square Garden.

The case study method allowed for the investigation of this complex, contemporary phenomenon (Zainal, 2007). Yin (2009) ^[31] advocates for case studies "as an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used (p. 23). This study was guided by three research questions: 1) What were the motivations for students who volunteered for the Big Ten Tournament? 2) What were the experiences of students who volunteered for the Big Ten Tournament? 3) What was the overall level of satisfaction of students who volunteered for the Big Ten Tournament? Data were collected via pre-event questionnaire, participant observation, a post-experience interview, and a daily reflective journal. Data were coded using open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) ^[7]. Data were evaluated and coded by a team of four sport management professionals and faculty members. A variety of themes emerged related to the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of the participants.

Experiential Learning in a Sport Management Curriculum

Experiential learning has been defined in several ways throughout the literature. Hoover and Whitehead (1975) ^[18] write that "Experiential learning exists when a personally responsible participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or

attitudes in a learning situation characterized by a high level of active involvement” (p.25). Experiential learning opportunities embedded within a curriculum enhances the learning experience of students (Southall, *et al.*, 2003) [27]. Petersen and Pierce (2009) [25] write that employers consider experience in the field as the most important component within a sport management program. Experiential learning can create strong leadership qualities (Flannery & Ward, 1999) [13], allow for greater learning comprehension and knowledge retention (Bauerle & Park, 2012) [2], and allow students to explore career options and build their resume (Brown *et al.*, 2018) [5]. Findings such as these have led academics and professionals in the field to work together to increase meaningful, experiential learning opportunities for students enrolled in a sport management curriculum.

Study Design

This study sought to examine the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of student volunteers engaging in an experiential learning opportunity as part of a sport management undergraduate curriculum. The exploratory case study design allows for the investigation of phenomena where previous research is lacking or has large gaps (Mills, Durepos, & Wiebe, 2010). Due to the previously discussed lack of research regarding the combination of experiential learning, motivation volunteering, and satisfaction of volunteering, an exploratory case study method was selected as the most appropriate method of inquiry. Ogawa and Malen (1991) [22] posit that exploratory case studies serve to increase knowledge related to complex social phenomena. This research was approached from the constructivist paradigm. Constructivism posits that individual involved in the experiences construct their own realities. This approach allows for multiple truths and provides participants the opportunity to share their realities with researchers (Creswell, 2014; Charmaz, 2006) [8, 6].

Setting

The 2018 Big Ten Conference Men’s Basketball Tournament was held at Madison Square Garden in New York City, New York between February 28th and March 4th. The 2018 edition of the event was the 21st iteration of the tournament, which allows the fourteen members of the Big Ten Conference to compete for an automatic bid into the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s Division I Men’s Basketball Tournament. The thirteen games of the tournament welcomed a total of 106,157 guests; games were also broadcast in cooperation with the Big Ten’s broadcast partners, each game was made available through a combination of broadcasts on the radio networks of the participating schools, the Big Ten Network, the Fox Sports smartphone application, and CBS.

Madison Square Garden is recognized as one of the world’s most famous arenas and is New York City’s oldest professional sports facility. The 2018 tournament was the first time the Big Ten hosted the event in New York City and marked only the second time the event had been hosted outside of the Midwest. Volunteers worked a variety of shifts and in a variety of positions over the course of the tournament including jobs escorting teams, cheer squads, and pep bands from their respective holding spaces to the competition floor, policing media and scorer tables for non-sponsor products, assistant with game operations, checking-in and credentialing teams, and checking-in and credentialing media.

The evening prior to the start of the tournament, all students

participating in the volunteer group traveled to Madison Square Garden for a mandatory orientation session. The twelve student volunteers and one supervising faculty member traveled from northern New Jersey via bus and then transferred to a subway to complete the trip to Penn Station, located beneath Madison Square Garden. The students met with members of the Big Ten Conference staff, members of the Madison Square Garden event staff, and other volunteers to be educated on their various roles, receive their credentials, and ask any questions they had related to the upcoming event.

Participants

Volunteers were recruited from the sport management program at a public, regional university in New Jersey. Recruitment emails were sent to 156 students within the program, 32 students responded in application for the opportunity, and the program faculty and department chair selected students to fill the 12 volunteer spots allocated to the university by the Big Ten. Students were selected based on their class rank, grade point average, and past performance in sport management major courses. This study used convenience sampling and invited all twelve selected volunteers to participate. While the study relied on convenience sampling, the sample was representative of the sport management program at the institution. Demographic information for the participants is found in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic information for Big Ten Tournament study participants

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Class Rank
Brianna	Female	Black	Senior
Ben	Male	Hispanic	Junior
Mark	Male	Asian-American	Junior
Bart	Male	Hispanic	Senior
Sean	Male	Black	Junior
Jason	Male	Black	Senior
Nathan	Male	White	Sophomore
John	Male	Hispanic	Junior
Geoff	Male	White	Senior
Maria	Female	Hispanic	Junior
Keith	Male	White	Senior
Mathias	Male	White	Senior

Data Collection

The quality of case studies is strengthened when multiple sources of data and evidence are used (Creswell, 2014; Yin, 2009) [31]. Guidance for the collection and treatment of data for this study relied heavily on Yin’s (2009) [31] work on case study research. Yin (2009) [31] writes that case study research can draw on up to six types of evidence: documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and physical artifacts. Data for this study were collected via pre-event questionnaires, participant daily journals, researcher field notes, and post-event semi-structured interviews.

Two weeks prior to the volunteer experience, students submitted written responses to fourteen open-ended questions which were designed to gauge their motivations and interest in volunteering to work at the Big Ten Tournament. Examples of questions included “What about this opportunity interested you most?”, “What are your expectations for this experience?”, and “What impact do you believe this experience will have on your career?” During the experience, students were asked to compose journal entries which chronicled their duties, experiences, and feelings associated with each volunteer shift they worked. Additionally, the

research team composed field and participant observation notes when they were able to observe the students in the experiential learning environment. Finally, the participants engaged in a post-experience semi-structured interview designed to provide them with the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and share those reflections with the research team. Examples of prompts from those interviews included “What is your overall level of satisfaction with this volunteer experience?”, “Based on this experience, would you be interested in volunteering at a similar event in the future?”, and “What recommendations would you make to the Big Ten professionals tasked with operating this event and recruiting volunteers?”

Data Analysis

Researchers conducted an inductive data analysis which allowed the team to identify emerging patterns, themes, and categories (Thomas, 2003; Marshall, 1999) ^[29]. Inductive analysis is the process of “examining case study data closely in order to find constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied” (Gall *et al.*, 1996, p. 453) ^[15]. Multiple sources of data were employed in order to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) ^[21]. Data analysis was facilitated using NVivo 12, qualitative data analysis software. Transcribed text from interviews, field notes, pre-event questionnaire responses, and reflection journals were entered into NVivo to code, categorize, and construct themes. Initial codes were established by the research team and NVivo, Microsoft Word, and Microsoft Excel were utilized in order to organize the data. Data were coded in three phases, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) ^[7].

Findings and Discussion

Motivations for Volunteering

The rich and robust nature of the qualitative data, gleaned from multiple sources, helped to illustrate a variety of motivations for volunteering at the Big Ten Men’s Basketball Tournament. Themes which emerged from data analysis included resume building, networking, gaining practical experience, and the unique nature of the opportunity. Themes related to motivations for volunteering are further discussed below.

Table 2: Motivations for volunteering at the Big Ten Men’s Basketball Tournament

Pseudonym	Resume Building	Networking	Gaining practical experience	Unique nature of opportunity
Brianna	x	x		
Ben	x	x	x	x
Mark	x		x	
Bart			x	x
Sean	x	x		
Jason	x	x		x
Nathan	x	x	x	x
John	x		x	x
Geoff	x		x	
Maria	x	x		x
Keith	x	x	x	x
Mathias	x		x	x

Resume Building

The desire to engage in an activity that could be used to

improve one’s resume emerged as a key theme with 11 of the 12 participants referring to that point. John summed it up succinctly stating, “I volunteered for the Big Ten Tournament because I believe that it will stand out to potential employers. Our professors are always talking about the ways that we can separate ourselves from the competition for jobs, and this seemed like a good way to do that.”

This finding supports previous literature which identifies these types of experiences as a key opportunity for students to gain applicable work experience which future employers desire (Handy *et al.*, 2010; Friedland & Morimoto, 2005; Crosby 1999) ^[16, 9, 14].

Networking

The desire to make connections and grow one’s personal network also emerged as a key theme. Seven participants referenced the concept of networking through their writings and interviews. Sean stated that he was motivated by the idea that “...this experience can help connect me with people who have tons of experience in the sport industry.” Keith added, “Working for the Big Ten will be a huge benefit to my future career. This event will help me create new relationships, network, and gain great experience from a top-tier organization.” This finding supports Bodey and Schaumleffel (2008) ^[3, 4] who write that networking with professionals acts as a powerful motivator for sport management students.

Gaining Practical Experience

The desire to gain practical experience was also identified as a motivational factor for participants. Eight students referenced a desire to engage in an opportunity that offered the ability to have hands-on experiences. Mathias shared, “This is a tremendous opportunity to learn outside the classroom in a real-world setting. I expect to learn things that I have not yet been taught in school. It’s important to have hands-on experiences before entering the field full-time.” This finding supports previous work which posits that students perceive value in opportunities which offer them exposure to practical learning experience (O’Shea & Watson, 2007; Pierce *et al.*, 2014) ^[23, 26].

Unique Nature of the Opportunity

Finally, the unique nature of the size and scope of the event served as a motivational factor for the participants. Eight students referenced the ability to gain an experience that many would never get as a driving factor for participation. Maria stated, “This is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Many people never get the chance to work on something this big.” Ben added, “I believe that volunteering for the Big Ten Tournament is not only a once in a lifetime opportunity, but it will also be an incredible learning experience.” This finding supports previous work which posits that sporting event volunteers are often motivated by the unique nature of the events themselves (Dickson *et al.*, 2015; Fairly, Kellett, & Green, 2007) ^[10].

Experiences of Volunteering

Data analysis revealed a variety of themes related to the experiences of participants which volunteered at the tournament. Those experiences included investigation of career direction, networking, and a dissatisfaction with the orientation process. Themes related to the experiences of participants are further discussed below.

Table 3: Experiences of volunteering at the Big Ten Men's Basketball Tournament

Pseudonym	Career direction	Networking	Dissatisfaction with orientation
Brianna	x	x	x
Ben	x		x
Mark	x	x	
Bart		x	x
Sean	x	x	
Jason			x
Nathan	x	x	x
John		x	x
Geoff	x	x	
Maria	x		x
Keith	x		x
Mathias	x		x

Career Direction

The ability to investigate potential career directions or options emerged as a key theme related to the experiences of participants. Nine volunteers referenced the ability to use the experience to investigate potential future job options in the sport industry. Geoff shared, "Before that, I didn't really know where in sports I wanted to go. I had a whole sports agent thing in mind, but now I've kind of went away from that. It made me realize I want to do gameday operations." Nathan added, "I'm only a sophomore so I'm not really sure what I want to do yet, but it allowed me to see what I might be interested in doing and what I'm not interested in doing. I got to talk to a lot of people just to get their perspectives on things." This finding supports previous research which posits volunteerism can serve to provide opportunities for investigation of potential career directions (Taylor & Pancer, 2007; Zakour, 1994) [28, 32].

Networking

Networking, as previously discussed, emerged as a key motivation for these participants and also emerged as a key theme related to the actual experiences of the students. Seven different participants referenced the ability to network with professionals working in the field as an important aspect of the experience they had at Big Ten Tournament. Keith stated that he was able to network during the experience, "I was able to sit all day with a VP of the Big Ten Network who was working one of the tables I was at. We talked about my career goals and what I could do to move towards them. She told me that something like this was a goldmine and to take advantage of the opportunity. She gave me her number and said to stay in touch." Mark discussed his networking approach, "I talked to a guy I reported to a lot that weekend. The last day I was working, that guy stopped me and gave me his contact information. He let me know that if I needed anything, a future reference, or some guidance, to contact him. I think building a rapport during my shifts led to a good professional connection that could benefit me down the road." This finding supports a litany of existing literature which expounds on the importance of networking to the volunteer experience (Bodey, 2008; Bodey & Schaumleffel, 2008; Elstad, 1996) [3, 4, 11].

Dissatisfaction with Orientation

A dissatisfaction with the orientation process emerged as a key theme related to the experiences of participants. Nine of the twelve participants referenced an unhappiness with the quality of the orientation process, which required all volunteers to meet at Madison Square Garden the evening

prior to the tournament's commencement. Brianna declared, "The orientation really wasn't worth the effort it took to get there. We were just there a short time, got our shirts and IDs, and then didn't really do anything else. They could have done that on our first day instead of requiring an extra trip." Mathias echoed those sentiments adding, "The orientation night was really a waste of time to be honest. We didn't get training or really do anything that couldn't have been accomplished before our first shift. Overall, I loved the experience, but it was not an effective use of time or money to attend that." Previous studies have trumpeted the importance of quality training and orientation programs as it relates to volunteer satisfaction, productivity, and retention (Auld, 2004; Koutrou & Berber, 2021) [1, 20].

Satisfaction with Volunteering

Data analysis also revealed two themes related to the participant satisfaction with the decision to volunteer. Participants discussed high overall levels of satisfaction with their decision to volunteer and the experiences they had. Additionally, participants offered suggestions in their evaluations of the experience, indicating a desire to help improve the experience for future Big Ten Men's Basketball Tournament volunteers. Themes related to the satisfaction levels of participants are discussed below.

Table 4: Satisfaction with experience of volunteering at the Big Ten Men's Basketball Tournament

Pseudonym	Highly satisfied with experience	Desire to improve future events
Brianna	x	x
Ben	x	
Mark	x	x
Bart	x	x
Sean	x	x
Jason	x	
Nathan	x	x
John	x	
Geoff	x	x
Maria	x	
Keith	x	x
Mathias	x	

High Levels of Satisfaction

High levels of satisfaction with the volunteering experience emerged as a key theme related to volunteer satisfaction. All twelve participants referenced happiness and value associated with their decision to volunteer. Nathan stated, "It was a life changing experience getting to be there and getting to work at an event like that. I couldn't be happier with the experience. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity and I'm glad I did it." Bart said, "I was very satisfied, it was one of the best experiences I've had. Just being there for the games and learning what goes on in back. If I had to grade it, I'd give it a 10 out of 10." Brianna added, "I was completely satisfied with deciding to volunteer and I'm thankful for the opportunity. It was such a good experience, especially to get to do something like this the last semester of my college experience." VanSickle, Pierce, and Diacin (2015) [30] write that there is a gap in the sport management literature related to the satisfaction of volunteers at major sporting events, this study helps to add to the knowledge base related to this phenomenon.

Desire to Improve Experience

While participants reported high levels of satisfaction with the

experience, a desire to improve the experience emerged as a theme. Participants offered up suggestions to help the professionals tasked with developing and managing the volunteer program. Sean opined, "I think the division of jobs and duties could be better planned. There were a lot of people that were working the same jobs at the same time. So maybe splitting up the work so there aren't as many people assigned to the same tasks at the same time." Mark agreed, "There was a lot of standing around for some of the parts, I feel like maybe we could get bigger roles or job duties." Large-scale sporting events rely heavily on volunteers for viability and financial success. Kim, Park, Kim, and Kim (2019) [19] write that sport event managers need to be cognizant of volunteers' needs and satisfaction in order to design sustainable volunteer programs.

Limitations and Delimitations

There are a variety of issues that could present themselves when data is collected from participants who are also students associated with the supervising faculty. One limitation identified was the possibility that some participants might have felt unfairly compelled to participate in the study. Participants may have also felt uncomfortable giving responses which they potentially viewed as critical of the experience. All participants were assured of the voluntary nature of the participation and assured that their participation and any responses provided would not change their standing or reputation with any supervising faculty member. Results from data analysis, particularly the theme related to suggestions to improve the experience, indicate that participants felt empowered and comfortable sharing critical, and potentially negative viewpoints of the experience. A second limitation deals with the nature of the Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament. Large-scale sporting events are by their very nature unique events. In addition, the Big Ten's event occurred in four different cities and venues over a four year period. As such, findings from study of this edition of the event may not be transferrable to the event for future times and locations.

A delimitation of the study deals with the participant sample. All participants in this study were recruited from student volunteers from William Paterson University. The nature of the participant sample therefore makes generalizability of these findings difficult. The degree to which these findings may be generalizable to other populations, events, and locations is dependent on the similarity between situations. Practitioners and researchers have the responsibility to evaluate future settings and situations to ascertain whether these findings are applicable.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the motivations, experiences, and satisfaction of 12 undergraduate sport management student volunteers at the 2018 Big Ten Conference Men's Basketball Tournament. Findings from this study provide an opportunity for faculty, administrators, and practitioners to understand what students are seeking and experiencing when considering engagement with experiential learning opportunities. This study extends the growing base of literature regarding programmed experiential learning opportunities for students in recreation and sport management programs. Additionally, the study provides a guide map for replication which can be utilized by educators in order to further develop the literature on experiential learning opportunities, while also providing direction on engaging with

professional organizations to provide meaningful opportunities for student learning. While the findings of this study indicate that each participant in this volunteer program had a positive experience, parsing participants words can provide professionals at the Big Ten Conference, as well as other similar organizations, with opportunities to consider volunteer program modifications which can result in positive outcomes for the organization as well as the volunteers.

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