

Impact of Campus Recreation Student Work Experiences on Post-Graduation Employment

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Introduction

Part-time student employment has often been dismissed as an “unfortunate part of student survival rather than as part of the student learning experience” (Neill et al., 2004, p. 125). However, recent studies have indicated that this is not the case, and student employees develop valuable transferable skills that enhance future employability and can be positively discussed during interviews (Harvey et al., 1998; Watts & Pickering, 2000).

Additionally, graduates with previous work experience were significantly more satisfied with their personal development of work-related skills than the graduates without work experience, and they also secured full-time permanent employment at higher rates (Blackwell et al., 2001). Additional research related to the positive impact of on-campus employment could reposition campus recreation student employment and strengthen its recognition as a valuable opportunity for learning, student development, and career preparation.

The purpose of the study is to provide clarity about the transfer of learning from campus recreation student employment to post-graduation professional employment.

Research Questions

- 1) What transferable skills did graduates develop during their campus recreation employment?
- 2) What type of learning environments supports the development of these transferable skills?
- 3) Do graduates utilize skills developed during campus recreation employment in their careers?

Methods

In this phenomenological study, sixteen participants completed the online survey, and eight of those participants were interviewed. Each of the participants met the following criteria:

- Previously worked as a part-time Intramural Sports Student Supervisor for at least one school year
- Graduated between 2009 to 2012
- Currently employed in a full-time career in both related and unrelated fields



Student Supervisors at Campus Recreation Thanksgiving Potluck

Setting

This study focused on Intramural Sports at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) Campus Recreation, which is comprised of two professional staff, one Graduate Assistant, and about 150 to 175 Student Officials and Supervisors. Intramural Sports offers 12 different leagues and 17 tournaments, including soccer, flag football, volleyball, hockey, basketball, and softball.

Results

Theme 1: A spectrum of learning environments facilitate conflict management skill development

The first major theme that emerged from this study was the formal, informal, and experiential environments that promoted conflict resolution skill development. The formal learning environments comprised of supervisor training and post-incident evaluation. The informal learning environments included job shadowing and on-the-job learning. Experiential learning occurred through trial and error and feedback from professional staff. One Student Supervisor said that the feedback from professional staff enabled him to evaluate past mistakes, learn from them, and make better decisions in the future.

“When I was an Official during my Freshman year, I would just watch what [the Supervisors] did — who the Supervisors checked in on that needed help or how they handled someone screaming at them during a game. When I became a Supervisor as a Sophomore, I would still pay attention to the Juniors and Seniors and almost shadow them a little bit.”

Theme 2: Department structure fosters leadership and a sense of community

The second theme that surfaced was the fundamental role of the department structure within Intramural Sports. The structure of Campus Recreation is distinctive because there are opportunities for greater responsibility and challenge during the transition from Official to new Supervisor to experienced Supervisor. Also the staff training, weekly Supervisor meetings, and frequent interaction between Supervisors and professional staff contributed to strong relationships, a sense of community, and feelings of being supported. The coinciding levels of challenge and support contributed to growth and leadership development, which supports Sanford’s (1962) Challenge and Support Theory of student development.

“The second year I felt like everything kind of shifted because the first year I looked up to the older people, and then my second year, the younger people were looking up to us. It was kind of like I learned from example from the people that were there before me, and then in turn the people that were below me learned from our example.”

Theme 3: Student staff members acquire transferable skills and career preparation and are positively impacted post-graduation

The third theme that emerged was the development of valuable skills through Campus Recreation student employment and the transfer of those skills into post-graduation careers. 100% of respondents reported that they gained valuable skills from working for Campus Recreation. These reported skills included confidence, task delegation, leadership, responsibility, staff supervision, conflict resolution, decision-making, time management, communication, and problem solving. Also, 100% of survey respondents reported that their Intramural Sports employment had an impact on their post-graduation employment. Several participants perceived that their Campus Recreation work experience positively impacted their job interviews because it was discussed during interviews that resulted in job offers. Two of the participants were influenced by their Campus Recreation employment to pursue their current career paths in recreation.

“It’s allowed me to progress past the entry level position within my company faster than anyone my age. I give a lot of credit for my success to my position in Intramural Sports as it helped me build a lot of the managerial skills I possess in my current occupation.”



Theme 4: Campus Recreation has a significant impact on overall college experience

The fourth and final theme that became apparent was the way that Campus Recreation employment shaped participants’ college experiences. A majority of participants discussed the strong friendships and social networks that developed through Campus Recreation. Several participants noted that their employment influenced their college experiences because they immediately met a group of peers who shared a similar interest in sports and continued to work together throughout college.

“I would say that doing Intramurals as a Supervisor was probably the best choice I made at UNH. I met some of my best friends. One of my best friends was a Supervisor. I was just in his wedding a few months ago. The relationships that I made with people while I was supervising Intramural Sports were 100 percent worth it. I still keep in contact with a ton of people who used to do it with me. So that alone was worth it.”

Conclusions

Campus Recreation student employment was viewed by past Intramural Sports Supervisors as more than a paycheck for the following reasons:

- Development of transferable skills that were utilized in post-graduation employment, regardless of college major
- Valuable opportunities leading peers
- Positive impact on overall college experience
- Source of friendships, role models, and mentors
- Professional staff’s emphasis on career preparation

Implications

For practitioners, Campus Recreation employment is a vital learning experience, and professional staff members have essential roles as mentors and role models. Graduates described their leadership opportunities within Campus Recreation as a crucial element to learning and growth. Therefore, practitioners should focus on providing leadership opportunities to facilitate further student development.



Student Supervisors at Staff Training

Future Research

- 1) Participants indicated that the Campus Recreation career development opportunities, such as resume workshops and mock interviews, were helpful in the post-graduation job search process. More research is needed to understand this impact on post-graduation employment.
- 2) Many of the participants reiterated their development of conflict management skills. This could be a distinct response that is related to the nature of Intramural Sports, compared to other areas. Thus, it would be beneficial to expand this study to Campus Recreation student staff from all program areas to compare the results.
- 3) In order to understand whether this phenomenon applies to other on-campus employers, this study could be replicated to explore the post-graduation impact of other university student employers.

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