Event management: From the classroom to the real world - a case study

by Hal J. Walker

Abstract

Event management is a course requirement commonly found in undergraduate and graduate sport management programs around the world. The skills and competencies required to effectively plan, organize and execute special events are very broad (Gladden, McDonald & Barr, 2005). This paper offers a detailed approach to instructing an applied course in event management. Topics addressed include: experiential learning, fundraising, philosophical considerations, student-reflection, service learning, professionalism and student-centered learning. The student benefits derived from coursework in event planning are extensive, and dialogue, writings, and research regarding pedagogical approaches to instruction in this area is warranted.

Event Management: From the Classroom to the Real World – A Case Study

Effective event management skills are invariably required for success in all facets of business. Special event planning requires many skills including attention to detail, organization, discipline and patience (Sawyer, 2005). Crowd control, operations, leadership, fund-raising, scheduling, marketing, concessions, and security, are but a few examples of numerous tasks, skills and traits required of facility and/or event managers (Ammon, 1998; Graham, Goldblatt & Delpy, 1995; Russo, 1985; Sawyer & Smith, 1999; Stier, 1994). Many sport management students are involved with a variety of sporting events, from tournament management to organizing fundraising events, all which require vast skill sets to successfully manage these activities (Gladden, McDonald & Barr, 2005). Experience with conceptualizing and managing special events offers the opportunity to practice and hone skills that are related to many career opportunities (Aprhys, 2005).

Event management skills can also be directly related to leisure, recreational, or personal activities. Vacation and wedding planning or simply organizing an office basketball pool require event planning skills to achieve any measure of success. Workshops abound at many industry related conferences on topics such as goal setting, leadership, communication (written and oral), time management, public speaking, networking, etiquette, sales, marketing, and promotions, all of which are connected on some level with event management activities. Although these skills are also addressed in a wide range of college coursework, event management has long been connected to college curricula related to sport and/or recreation management (Sport Management Program Review Council, 2000). Sport has also grown in the minds of many leisure and/or sport management professionals as no longer being simply a component of leisure, but as an independent, multi-billion dollar enterprise (Zakrajsek, 1993). Kovaleski (2006), reported that events have become significant corporate marketing tools and the need to make an impression when planning an event has become increasingly important. Event planning skills appear to be useful for many personal and business related activities, and classes that offer the opportunity to shape these skills can be viewed as very beneficial.

Programs in event management didn't exist within traditional Physical Education programs, with *Organizational Administration* being the dominant administrative course offering in most curricula. As academic programs expanded in the 1960's to include sport management as a college major, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) developed a task force to address the need for uniform program content in this developing industry (Sport Management Program Review Council, 2000). NASPE linked with the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) and developed joint curriculum guidelines which were first published in 1987, and then revised in 1989, by a committee comprised of NASPE's Sport Management Council (SMC) and the NASSM Executive Council (SMPRC). Additional revisions were developed between 1997 and 1999, resulting in updated standards published in 1999 (Sport Management Program Review Council, 2000).

With profound and continuing expansion of sport management programs through the late 20th century (Parkhouse, 2001), a common class offering in sport management curricula was Facility and Event Management. Although the NASPE/NASSM Sport Management Program Review Council (SMPRC) standards do not specifically list "event management" or "event planning" as one of the 12 standards, many of the standards require extensive content that address skills embraced in event management practices (Sport Management Program Review Council, 2000). Standard 3, *socio-cultural dimensions in sport*, recommends content related to goal setting and peak performance, psychosocial influences, sport personality and interpersonal relationships. Standard 4, *management and leadership in sport*, require a number of topics related to event planning such as strategic planning, philosophical orientation, goal setting, establishment of mission statements, personal and personnel management, time management, operations and maintenance, programming, scheduling, communications and budgeting. Standard 6, *marketing in sport* requires content related to fundraising, sponsorship, endorsement and marketing planning, once again, common event planning elements. Standard 7, *communication in sport*, Standard 8, *budget and finance in sport*, Standard 9, *legal aspects of sport*, and additional sport management coursework specifically embrace event planning components, making this a central theme in sport management curricula found anywhere in the world. With event management as an observed theme, a discussion outlining the pedagogy of a college class addressing this content area is warranted.

This paper will outline an event management class model, suitable for a variety of majors related to sport, leisure and recreation management over a traditional 14 week semester. The specific goals and philosophy outlined in this paper are those of

the author and certainly can be adjusted in many ways to suit individual or institutional needs. This outline is simply one way of teaching an applied class that is likely to suit the skill sets required of many curricula in sport and recreation management, as well as address numerous competencies required by NASPE/NASSM (Sport Management Program Review Council, 2000).

Perhaps one of the most deeply seeded discussions among professionals in the discipline of sport and recreation management is one that broaches the theory vs. practice debate. According to Halpern and Hakel (2003), learning is significantly impacted by a combination of knowledge, experience and practice with retrieving information. Experience, devoid of previous comprehension limits learning. Experience alone may lead individuals to self report high levels of confidence about information recall however, metacognition literature shows that many people do not effectively critique their own comprehension of difficult topics (Halpern and Hakel, 2003). Effective learning is reported as being bolstered by a mix of teaching methodologies that include information transfer (lecture), actual experience, and practice at retrieval.

According to Edwards (1999), graduates of sport management programs are expected to face experiences that vary significantly from theoretical examples presented in typical classrooms. This author proceeds to explain that the development of judgment must also evolve from these experiences, leading to enhanced problem solving abilities. It is stressed that theory is certainly not ignored, however, that theory and practice are extensively commingled. Kuh (2003) stated that being engaged in activities helps build a foundation of skills that are central to being productive. Verner, Keyser and Morrow (2001) discussed the relationship between experiential and traditional approaches to learning by stating ". . . . enlightenment occurs when something read in a textbook comes to life as the learner makes the connection between the idea and its execution" (p.31).

Parr and Lashua (2005, p.24) addressed the need for dialogue about leisure to be tied to practice for it to have meaning that takes the discussion beyond a traditional academic exercise. These authors state that practical experiences related to service learning, along with opportunities for independent and critical thinking, also enhance one's ability to develop a professional perspective. Cunningham and Kwon (2003), took this concept a step further and state that "understanding factors that affect the consumption of sport will improve the efficiency of marketing communication between service providers and consumers, and, for that matter, possibly influence the entire marketing program of a sport organization" (p.127). Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda and Yee (2000) discuss the concept of reflection, and how important it is to consider past activities and how this process most effectively connects academic material to a service learning environment.

Event Management Course Mission

The goal of the author in teaching a course in event management is to provide a highly practical and engaged process that encourages civic responsibility and autonomy among each and every learner. Organizing a special event, with a direct connection to a community agency, enhances class member awareness of the mission and goals of the selected philanthropy. According to students, enhanced learning is reported when experiential opportunities are provided in their classes (Zeigler and Bowie, 1995). This course as presented is best suited for a higher level undergraduate college course, with class preparation in business, communication, sales, and marketing, however, it can also serve as a foundational class, extending the opportunity for younger students to embrace a wide range of subjects to be addressed in future program offerings. The class could also be taught at the graduate level, as practice and experience with event management skill development, can benefit any learner.

Weeks 1–3

The first three weeks of this fourteen week class involve extensive discussion and interaction on topics related to an exploration of personal philosophies, past leadership experiences, self assessment (personal strengths and weaknesses), and interactive group activities. This can involve techniques and approaches including personality assessments, team-building, a ropes course experience, or interactive class and group bonding activities. The first assignment in this model is the writing of a "personal philosophy paper." This paper provides an outline encouraging the student to take an introspective look at personal strengths and weaknesses, past leadership involvements, and a reflection on skills, attitudes and experiences and how they have shaped personal development.

Instructors could also consider utilizing various personality inventories for each student to complete and assess, also with the goal of acquiring a deeper understanding of self. The goal in this early phase of the class is to encourage sharing and interaction among class members, paving the way for more refined class involvements tied to the event planning process later in the course.

Week 4

In small groups, class members are next asked to brainstorm various special event ideas for the semester. Event ideas are instructed to include additional information including facility use, reservation policies (including contracts), date options, a summary of expected costs, target participants, resources needed, and relevant related factors. Suggestions are then discussed as a class and through a democratic process specific ideas are either included or excluded for continued consideration. When a manageable number of possibilities are decided upon, a group vote determines the event or events to be planned for the semester. The number of events one class of students plans to organize and execute are entirely up to the instructor and his/her class goals, however, a ratio of one event for every 15-20 students is recommended. This 15-20 student number is subjective, however, the author has experienced greater difficulty in maintaining active involvement of all class members with larger numbers managing a single event. The nature of the event may also impact an *ideal* number of students involved, however, this would be at the discretion of the course instructor and the specific goals and objectives established for the class.

Following the event determination, class members are then instructed to select a community non-profit agency to support. When selected, an agency representative is invited to speak to class members and articulate the goals and mission of the philanthropy. The class is then instructed to involve, engage, and communicate

over the entire semester with this selected agency. A fundraising/ sponsorship element is then added into the goals of the event planning process. Any and all funds raised in the execution of the planned event, are then pledged to the class chosen philanthropy. The class is instructed that core course goals for the event are to plan and manage a professional event, break even financially, and/ or raise funds for the selected philanthropy.

Funds may need to be established for the start-up costs associated with most events, however, this can easily be accomplished and most events can be planned and executed with minimal expense. Additional options for funding may also be employed. This may include course fees however this concept can be worked out on an individual basis by the instructor and his/her department. If the departmental budget does not permit such expenditures, having a fundraising component connected to the event planning process can become central to the learning experience. A basic fundraising principle expressed by Stier (1994), is that donors tend to give when there is a good reason to be involved. If individuals have an interest in the cause, along with the goals and objectives of the philanthropy, they are more likely to support the event.

Weeks 5–11

The instructor extends a specific week during the semester within which the activity must be planned (in this 14 week semester example the event would take place during week 12). Approximately half the allotted course time is set aside for student-centered event planning activities. The model presented could work with any class meeting schedule and adapted accordingly.

Clearly the instructional approach is the instructor's prerogative however an experiential approach is suggested. For this approach to achieve maximal effectiveness the instructor extends extensive autonomy to the class members for all decision making. College students are certainly capable of following instructions however a key element of this engaged process is to make the students responsible for the event outcome. For this model, the following suggestions are offered:

- A community agency is chosen by the group to serve as a sponsor of the event/s and all proceeds directly support the selected agency
- Event/s must break-even, or earn a profit for the chosen philanthropy
- The community agency is infused into the event and the event planning process as much as possible. A leader of this non-profit agency should be invited to disseminate literature and speak to the class about their cause (as soon as possible after event selection). A central class goal of infusing the agency into the entire process is a critical civic engagement concept and elevates this from a simple event planning activity to an engaged service learning experience tied to civic responsibility and community purpose. Involvement beyond this minimal class presentation can then evolve depending on the nature and type of agency selected. For example a sponsoring agency that has underprivileged youth as its constituency, can be invited to take part in some of the event planning, as well as participate in the event and related social activities. Class members can decide the appropriate level of agency involvement.
- Execution of a *professional event*! Perhaps the most important

element of the event planning process is the inclusion of these six words: *the execution of a professional event*! Obviously the term "professional" is subjective, however, regardless of interpretation the goal of the process should be the culmination of planning a highly organized and professional event. This suggests formality, synchronized activities, professional appearance, clear communication and appropriate conduct of all class members throughout the process. Clear guidelines will make a majority of the instructor intrusions unlikely, however, although the process is extensively student managed, the instructor reserves the right to make suggestions along the way, depending on the actions and conduct of class members.

- Committee structures are recommended, however, the group ultimately decides how to organize their event to suit their particular needs and desires. Committees are encouraged to address the following areas: operations, logistics, budgeting, sponsorship, marketing, promotions and advertising. Some classes may choose to work in large groups while others may find they work more effectively in smaller sub-sets. The dynamics of each group are likely to impact the success of their efforts, however, the autonomous actions of the group remains the underlying principle that has been effectively utilized by the writer. The goal is to make all class members responsible for the culminating event and let the group decide on the means they choose to utilize in reaching this end. The experience of the author is that learning is often inversely related to the dysfunction of the group. When things go well everyone is pleased however, the most profound comments illustrating the perceived value of the process have evolved from the events where group functions were less than ideal.
- Once committees are established the instructor takes "committee photos" with each student holding their name on a placard and these photos are then posted on-line so that all class members have access to pictures and names of classmates. This is then made available over the entire semester and the students are encouraged to 'get to know' their classmates.
- All committee decisions must be clearly articulated to all groups, as well as the class instructor each step of the process. Decisions about flyers, publications, publicly shared letters, sponsorship levels, pricing, space booking, and all professional correspondence or decisions that could impact the group effort, must be shared and consensus gained, before proceeding.
- The class must plan for a full walk-through of the event, including equipment placement, registration tables, signage, and staff placement. Any other required staffing issue should be clarified at this time.

Week 12

Event week! A 7-day span is recommended for scheduling of the planned event in the class syllabus. This allows some flexibility for date selection, permitting events on any day of the week. Some college campuses with active schedules may warrant the pre-scheduling of specified facilities, however, event options can vary and this quickly becomes yet another obstacle for students in the real life planning of a special event.

Golf tournament event cook-out

Sponsor thank you – sand volleyball event

Weeks 13–14

Allowing a minimum of two full weeks, post-event, allows time for class evaluation, feedback, reflection, budget resolution, completion of class assignments, and event closure. The class immediately following the event is reserved for open discussion about the event, unless this can occur on-site, immediately after the event. This session includes comments, suggestions, and general feedback about all event planning experiences. This is followed in the next class by the submission and discussion of individual event diaries and personal reflections. The class instructor is encouraged to request submission of these reflections on occasions earlier in the semester, to ensure that meaningful dialogue is occurring, rather than waiting until the end of the semester. This also allows for evaluative feedback and the opportunity for students to improve their writings, if lacking.

Committees then meet to discuss group presentations, on the 3rd or 4th day, post event. This involves a PowerPoint (or similar) formal presentation, including suggested time-lines, committee duties and responsibilities, reflections, literature support, and strengths and weaknesses of the group's efforts. These formal presentations are then shared with all class members, such that all event planning components and information of all committee activities are available.

For the final class meeting, a social is recommended. The charitable organization representative is invited to attend and a check for class proceeds is extended to the agency at this time. The writer has all class members sign a large media center prepared *check* and a photo is taken with the class for publication in the appropriate school outlet, if desired.

Related Issues: Class funding

Financial support for this process has evolved from none, for the first classes held, to a $500 "float" available at the start of each semester. These funds are for start-up costs only and must remain in the account at the end of each semester. There is always the risk that a profit will not be generated, however this would need to be carefully articulated with the appropriate department head or administrator with budget responsibility. Alternative approaches to the financing of this class could also be considered, such as charging a class fee. Events could also be planned without a fundraising approach however this element adds considerable value to the experiential process.

Over the past nine semesters, classes have successfully negotiated the goal of breaking-even or raising money each and every semester. Amounts generated have ranged from a low of $250 one semester, to a high of $7,500. The grand total is nearing $17,000 over the past nine semesters, for 9 different community agencies.

The key element in this process is student autonomy and control over decision-making. Clearly the outcome of the event could have an impact on departmental image, however, at its foundation, this is an educational experience and the class should be viewed as a process, rather than a means to an end. Instructor involvement should largely be supportive in nature and not professor lead. Leadership opportunities should be seen as dynamically available, through each step of the process.

Related Issues: Alcohol

Event planners are liable for a large number of issues related to the event planning process (Sawyer and Smith 1999). A topic worthy of mention involves the potential availability of alcohol at class organized events. Some institutions or departments may have clear guidelines regarding the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of alcohol presence at a class sponsored activity. Clearly a "no alcohol" policy is the simplest approach to take. The consideration of alcohol however, can be a valuable process for the class to debate (from a social, legal, and image perspective). A thoughtful, professional and responsible discussion of this topic can be a great experience for students. The liability issues associated with alcohol accessibility must, however, be clearly embraced. These issues could include the hiring of a 3rd party vendor, the need for enhanced security, or checking with the institution's insurance carrier to name a few. The author's experience has been that when students are permitted to embrace this topic in a meaningful way,

rather than simply being told "no -- alcohol is not permitted" a lively discussion is likely to evolve. This decision should be thought out extensively by the course instructor prior to developing the course syllabus. If the instructor states "alcohol is an option," the instructor (and the university) should be prepared to stand behind the group decision if it is decided that alcohol is appropriate at the planned event and all necessary approvals are obtained.

Related Issues: Fundraising and Sponsorships

Another topic worthy of discussion is fundraising and the solicitation of event sponsors. This can be a highly volatile and delicate topic that needs to be embraced by the department and possibly even the institution's administration. Many institutions are highly centralized with regard to fundraising and students scouring the community for donations may simply not be appropriate. Fund-raising is a valued skill for sport management graduates to possess and can be a terrific asset in many employment settings (Stier, 1997). Without departmental and/or institutional support to canvass the community for donations (money or in-kind), a significant element of the event planning process may be lost.

If appropriate, a sponsorship committee is charged with generating a list of potential sponsors and then sharing this list with the appropriate university office that is responsible for soliciting institutional support. This is an important step to consider, as the university could be involved with soliciting a gift from a local organization, and class members should be sensitive to the fact that their efforts may interfere with this important institutional activity. The reality is, it is very difficult to solicit cash donations of any kind and the class typically ends up acquiring smaller gifts and donations that keep this a modest effort, and not one where hundreds of dollars are exchanging hands. The sensitivity and responsibility of approaching this effort in an organized and thoughtful way is a tremendous experience and responsibility for members of the sponsorship committee. The development of sponsorship levels, promises articulated to sponsors that must be fulfilled, and the opportunity to network with business owners and professionals in the community, are terrific student experiences. Small grants may also be available for philanthropic endeavors, although the short duration of the class makes this a challenge. The opportunity for students to make professional presentations to business owners can be an invaluable experience.

Additional Comments

The experience of the author is that each class is very dynamic and highly interactive. Most classes have operated with 4-6 committees, while others have opted to form a larger number of small committees with very specific tasks. One class functioned very effectively as a large group and individuals assumed specific tasks along the way. Some classes have nominated committee leaders, while others have nominated two or three class leaders that circulated and orchestrated the activities of the class to ensure effective communication among all students and groups. There are strengths and weaknesses with any plan, and valuable lessons can be gained from any approach taken.

From an instructional stance, the scariest aspect of this event planning process occurs when the activity selected has the potential for a significant audience, with the university and

departmental image at stake. If elements of this expectation are not satisfied the instructor always maintains the right to make suggestions and require alterations to the class plans. Examples of this are professional dress on event day, publicity for the event, institutional communications, etc. The class instructor is present to make sure class members don't make significant mistakes and tarnish the image or reputation of the department or institution. Without question this is a fine line to walk, however, it is a terrific way to teach real-life skills, practical course content, along with motivating students to take ownership for the event planning process.

The charitable organization is included in the event (when possible), and upon culmination of the event, they are invited for a post-event social where proceeds are extended to the agency and a celebration and reflection of the event takes place. Students critique the process they experienced and provide shared suggestions for enhanced future efforts.

A philanthropy check presentation ceremony

Each committee is then charged with completing a time-line of their activities, a step-by-step process that should be followed by others when planning a similar event and each of these plans are then presented formally to all class members (PowerPoint). This offers each committee component to all class members, such that every student has access to each event planning component. An event evaluation is also completed by all event participants (a syllabus requirement), again sharing feedback as to how the class fared in the event planning process.

Group diaries are also compiled by each class member, along with personal reflections and insights about all aspects of the experience. Group dynamics, classmate interactions, frustrations, joys, successes, failures, any element perceived worthy of mention, are recorded. Class attendance is taken by each individual and also recorded and submitted in the end-of-semester report. A short version of this report is requested after the first few weeks of the planning process, to offer feedback on the diary inclusions and to suggest ways to strengthen future content and reflections shared.

Each student is also required to provide feedback on the contributions of fellow committee members, along with a rank-ordering of their efforts. The hypothetical scenario presented is that every student is the supervisor of each committee member and they are responsible for evaluating individual contributions over the entire semester. This can be an uncomfortable process, however, it is certainly a valuable exercise to experience. Individuals are given a dollar figure to extend in the form of an annual pay raise for the

group and amounts must be extended in the form of merit pay to all group members. To force a true rank ordering, students are not permitted to extend the same amount of money to more than one individual. Even if students do not aspire to supervisory roles, they will no doubt be evaluated by others in a similar manner, making the experience a valuable one, regardless of personal career goals.

Examples of activities organized have been varied. A golf tournament, a male pageant, a dunk-tank event, an adventure race, a professional conference, a sand volleyball tournament, a wheelchair basketball game, an eating contest, a bowling tournament, a casino night, and a laser tag competition are some event examples. Additional class parameters extended by the author, are to not allow the repeat of any particular event, or the support of the same community agency of a previous class. The students seem to really enjoy the autonomy and independence of planning their own event. The practical nature of the event seems to extend the entire process much greater personal and professional relevance.

Following are some student comments from the course evaluations:

"I learned more in this class than any other course I have taken"; "This event management class creates a positive atmosphere in which a balance of involvement and student responsibility exists. I consider this class one of the most positive academic experiences I have had"; "Limited professor control enabled students to successfully spread their wings"; "A great approach to event planning and allowing students to make their own decisions and learn from success and failure. The only way to truly experience event planning is through experience and that is what this class accomplishes"; "This class allowed students to take responsibility and figure things out for ourselves"; "Applied learning is the best"; "This class gave the student's independence. It allowed students to learn responsibility and mature"; "At first I found this class structure difficult to deal with. I then learned to appreciate it. I loved the practical nature of the class. We learned by doing and this turned out to be an interesting and beneficial way to learn".

As the class has evolved, the instructor has found ways to encourage greater utilization of outside resources and literature, as these are required when presenting the committee summary at the conclusion of the event. It is the instructor's belief that students are very good at following instructions and they will inevitably do what they are told to do if a grade is attached to the outcome. Students can take full credit for what they create, or take full responsibility for event components that fall short of a desired outcome. The lessons learned about the difficulty of group interaction and dynamics are extensive. Even when events are less successful than expected, the lessons learned seem much more valuable and meaningful when students are responsible for their actions. Based on student feedback and evaluative materials, individuals consistently comment on the value of this process when they are asked to take ownership and responsibility for the entire process.

Closing Comments

Employer's desire skills associated with problem solving, interpersonal relations and self-management (Raybould and Wilkins, 2005). Ideally, a content based class would be a great precursor to this practical approach to "teaching" an event planning course, however, many experiences can assist in the development of career related skills and abilities. Learn the theory first, and then execute this theory with the knowledge required to effectively execute the event, and the event outcomes are likely to be enhanced. This class was originally structured with much of the lecture content and "training" provided in the early classes, however, this same content can be read and synthesized concurrently as students prepare for their planned event. The interest and excitement in reviewing the literature when students self-direct this process, has resulted in much greater interest compared with this process being formally guided by the instructor.

Theory vs. practice! Will this debate ever be resolved? It is this authors' opinion there is a strong argument for a balance of each. One augments the other and students have fun and learn at the same time. What better place for a service-oriented, civic engaged and experiential learning process to occur, than in an event management class? If class members take ownership and responsibility for special event planning and execution; if a community agency benefits; if student learning appears to be engaged and dynamic; if relevant course content is sought, acquired and shared; and if students enjoy the autonomy and leadership opportunities that abound, it is a "win-win" scenario for all involved!

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