Defining Diversity and Inclusion: Tensions and Contradictions in the Sport Management Classroom

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Sport is an institution that plays a role in both reproducing and resisting societal power relations (Dashper & Fletcher, 2013). As such, educating aspiring sport professionals on diversity and inclusion is critically important for academic programs (Stowe & Lange, 2018). However, little research has been conducted on this topic. Thus far, related studies have generally focused on gender (e.g., Morris et al., 2019; Sauder et al., 2018), showing that women studying sport management experience varied forms of discrimination. Further, White, male, heterosexual sport management majors tend to think of diversity in sport in limited ways, namely, by focusing only on gender and race (Vianden & Gregg, 2017). This bounded view is particularly concerning given that White, male students hold the numerical majority within sport management programs in the United States (Barnhill et al., 2018).

Building on this emerging literature, the current study was anchored in the following two research questions: 1) How do undergraduate sport management students define diversity and inclusion? 2) What trends emerge in students’ discussion of specific aspects of diversity and inclusion (i.e., age, disability, gender, LGBTQ+, race/ethnicity, religion, and socioeconomic status) in sport? These research questions were explored via qualitative methods. Specifically, a fairly diverse sample of 13 undergraduate sport management students was recruited from three separate mid-Atlantic institutions to participate in semi-structured interviews. Data was transcribed and coded by two researchers per the procedures explained by Campbell et al. (2013). Trustworthiness was at the forefront of the data collection and analysis processes.

Results showed that students conceptualized diversity and inclusion as two distinct concepts. Diversity tended to be defined using words like “mixed,” or “differences” whereas inclusion focused on language like “included” and “lack of discrimination.” Interestingly, some students immediately discussed these concepts in pragmatic terms, identifying how they could be useful in academic and workplace contexts; other students articulated them as inherently valuable societal ideals. Data analysis also revealed a number of tensions and contradictions within students’ perceptions with respect to specific aspects of diversity. For example, students generally showed minimal and self-focused understandings of issues related to age, disability, LGBTQ+, religion, and socioeconomic status, suggesting that there is room for growth in the incorporation of these topics within the sport management curriculum. Further, many students demonstrated implicit and explicit biases in all areas of diversity, largely related to taken-for-granted perceptions of issues based on their own positionality.

Together, the findings from this research yield many practical implications for academic programs, and serve to advance the scant literature on this important topic. Specifically, data demonstrates that students are acknowledging receipt of education around diversity and inclusion, particularly in their sport management courses, however they are not necessarily processing the content as intended. Open-mindedness is considered to be a characteristic of post-millennials (Ismail & Lu, 2014), which suggests that diversity and inclusion education can effect change in current students, yet this present study indicates that faculty and programs need to enhance pedagogy to deliver effective lessons associated with these crucial topics.