Preparing Students for Career Longevity Amid Uncertainty with Design Thinking

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COVID-19 will have a lasting impact on the sports world for years to come. The industry is rethinking how it does business, from player safety to fan engagement and much more, in 2021 and beyond. The fundamental challenge facing sport management educators is how to adjust our pedagogy to meet needs of an industry amidst an unprecedented amount of uncertainty and change. Leading the next generation of sports innovators requires faculty to challenge traditional norms in sport management education. For example, will case studies created in a pre-COVID world be effective in a post-2020 world? Will dated examples in our lectures and case studies prepare students to solve and lead in the sports industry in the future? Will having students volunteer at events when they are all cancelled give them the experience they need to show their value to an organization? This presentation argues that we must reimagine the way we prepare students to think about career longevity with a growth mindset.

There is a paradigm shift happening, and this presentation explains how design thinking (DT) can arm students with a toolset that will help them be leaders and creative problem solvers instead of followers. DT is a human-centered mindset and iterative approach to innovation that seeks to understand the user, challenge assumptions, and redefine problems to identify solutions to many types of problems (Dam & Siang, 2018). DT is a fresh lens for understanding users and can lead to innovation in sport contexts rooted in its framework to help students understand users’ needs, motivations, behaviors, and feelings (Pierce, Davies, & Kryder, 2019). DT pushes students outside the classroom/textbook and into the field to empathize with real users using ethnographic research methods like interviews, observation, and contextual inquiry. DT pushes students to reframe the problem space before jumping too quickly ahead to ideation, and gather user feedback from low-fidelity prototypes before “perfecting” the solution.

Building on the work of Pierce, Davies, and Kryder (2019) in their Pedagogical Innovation paper on DT, this presentation demonstrates how instructors can organize their curricula around human-centered design mindsets using the example of a semester-long project focused on the recruitment and retention of sports officials, which is a critical issue that threatens the ecosystem of youth sports (Szulik, 2019). The pool of licensed officials is getting significantly older and declining in nearly every state (Officially Human, 2019). The annual attrition rate for sports officials is 20%, and 80% of officials quit after just two years (NASO, 2017). The effects felt by athletes, coaches, and parents include rescheduling games, reducing the number of officials on a crew, asking officials to call more games per day, changing game rules to include fewer players, canceling lower levels of competition, and hiring inexperienced officials, all of which lead to overworked officials and fewer participation opportunities. In sum, youth sports face an existential crisis if innovation does not occur in the recruitment and retention of sports officials.