

Establishing Social Work Practicum Placements in Sport Settings: A Constraints Theory Perspective

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Abstract

Social work in sport is a growing subspeciality of social work practice, and there is a need for social work programs to graduate social work students competent to work with athlete populations. Practicum opportunities in sport settings are an important part of such educational efforts. However, there are challenges to establishing these placements because sport is a nontraditional social work setting. This narrative inquiry explored the constraints of social work practicum staff in establishing practicum placement opportunities in sport organizations. Overall, participants had to make certain planning decisions based on the culture of the organization, which was different for elite versus youth and community-based sport organizations. These different types of organizational contexts also led to different challenges, although the strategy of remaining open and transparent about the expectations was used to overcome both the challenge of the elite sport system and the need to assure meaningful educational tasks for students in youth and community-based sport settings. Finally, participants needed to negotiate their positionalities to prove their understanding of sport culture to gain trust and credibility with the gatekeepers throughout the planning process. Participants experienced interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural constraints, and had to implement various strategies to overcome those challenges.

Keywords: social work education; field education; internships; sport social work

Social work in sport is a growing subspecialty of the social work profession (Lawson & Anderson-Butcher, 2000; Moore & Gummelt, 2019). Even so, there are limited sport-specific educational opportunities for social work students looking to work in sport settings (Beasley et al., 2021; Beasley et al., 2022a; Magier et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2018). This may not only be a barrier for future social work students to get into sport practice but may also have consequences for competent care of athletes. Thus, social work practicum placements in sport settings can be a foundational step in further professionalizing sport social work practice.

However, practicum placements in sport settings are an example of a nontraditional social work setting, which provides unique challenges to creating and sustaining practicum partnerships. Both social work literature (e.g., Dhembba, 2012; Rhodes et al., 1999; Spector 2020, 2019), and sport management literature (e.g., Hardin et al., 2021; Odio et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2021) have identified constraints to establishing meaningful internship opportunities for students. Thus, the purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand what constraints social work practicum staff must negotiate when establishing a social work placement in a sport setting. The findings of this study build on calls by social work scholars (e.g., Beasley et al., 2021; Clark et al., 2022; Magier et al., 2023) to create more specialized learning opportunities for sport social work by providing insights on how to create practicum partnerships with sport organizations.

Literature Review

Athletes across sport settings, from youth to elite, are at risk for diminished mental health (Beasley et al., 2024; Saxe & Hardin 2022; Strohle, 2017).

Therefore, scholars have suggested interdisciplinary care teams are a needed model of care to meet the varying needs of athletes (e.g., Bader & Martin, 2019; McHenry et al., 2021; Waller et al., 2016). Social workers have long been considered a key professional in interdisciplinary care teams due to their training in case management and generalist practice (Craig et al., 2016; Harkey, 2017). Consequently, many social work practitioners and scholars have advocated for the inclusion of social workers in sport settings (McHenry et al., 2021; Moore & Gummelt, 2019; Newman et al., 2019). This growth has meant there is a need to incorporate sport social work into the general social work curricula (Clark et al., 2022). Specifically, scholars posit that as practicum experience is the key pedagogy of social work education (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015a), there needs to be concerted efforts to increase the availability of sport-specific practicum placement opportunities for social work students (Beasley et al., 2021, 2022; Magier et al., 2023; Newman et al., 2019). However, as social work in sport is still an emerging subspecialty of social work practice, these practicum placements are still nontraditional social work settings, which creates unique barriers.

Nontraditional Practicum Placements

Scholars define nontraditional practicum placements in social work as any setting where the social work student is not surrounded by other social work professionals (Jasper et al., 2013; Hughes, 2009) and where the organization has a core business not related to social work or welfare services (McLaughlin et al., 2015). In recent years, as the number of social work students globally has increased, social work

programs are struggling to find suitable organizations to place students (Cleak & Smith, 2012; CSWE, 2015b). Consequently, there has been an increase in nontraditional practicum placements to meet the demand (Hek, 2012). These include libraries, museums, tax-preparation, and theater, where interns provide case management and work on community development initiatives (Aykanian et al., 2020; Elswick et al., 2015).

Even as nontraditional practicum placements are becoming more common, to the extent of this literature review, there are very few empirical studies looking at nontraditional practicum placements generally. There is some literature that has identified benefits to these nontraditional settings for social work students. For example, students can improve their social work skills (Scholar et al., 2012) and students get the opportunity to learn to operate in an interprofessional team (Hughes, 2009). Furthermore, due to having to educate other professionals on the social work profession, students may exit the placement with a better understanding of social work values and ethics (Jasper et al., 2013; Scholar et al., 2012) and the breadth of the social work profession (Rawsthorne et al., 2018).

There are also challenges, such as the hesitancy of students to be placed in nontraditional settings, and the use of a task supervisor, who is not a social worker (Elswick et al., 2015). Many social work students considering placements in nontraditional settings express their fear of not getting to practice social work skills (Rawsthorne et al., 2018). Therefore, practicum staff may have difficulty finding students willing to be placed in such settings. Then, practicum staff need to negotiate the challenges of having a professional who is not a social worker act as task supervisor for the social work student. Jasper and colleagues

(2013) found that some task supervisors lacked knowledge of the social work profession, which may impact student learning. Additionally, there are logistical challenges with this arrangement (Cleak & Zuchowski, 2018; Zuchowski, 2016), such as student start dates, identifying the social work student's role in the organization, and additional pressure on task supervisors (McLaughlin et al., 2015). Even so, there appears to be a growing recognition that these nontraditional placements can provide valuable practicum experiences for social work students, and should be considered by all practicum staff (Scholar et al., 2012; Aykanian et al., 2020). As sport organizations do not currently extensively hire social workers (Menaker et al., 2023) and their core business is not social welfare services, sport organizations are a nontraditional practicum placement setting. Thus, there can be predicted challenges to implementing sport-based practicum placements, which may be compounded by the culture of sport.

Internships in Sport Settings

There are many documented benefits to internships in sport organizations for students looking to work in any aspect of the sport industry (Brown, 2018), including competitive advantage in the job market (Southall et al., 2003), bridging the gap between theory and practice (Young & Barker, 2004), professional networking (Koo et al., 2016), professional and career development (Sauder et al., 2016), and deciding if a career in sport is a good fit (Cunningham et al., 2005). Scholars have also found many benefits for sport organizations to host interns, as internships are vital to achieve their organizational mission and goals (Bradbury et al., 2021; Yoh & Choi, 2011). Internship opportunities provide seasonal employees for sport organizations as well as

fill entry-level employment positions (Barefoot & Martinez, 2023; Cunningham et al., 2005). Internships are also an opportunity for organizations to develop future employees and to identify candidates for future employment opportunities, serving as an extended interview process for organizations and creating a potential applicant pool (Walker et al., 2021).

Brandon-Lai and colleagues (2016) found that students gain political skills, domain specific self-efficacy, sport industry identification, and future intentions of employment opportunities from internships. However, they added that these outcomes are moderated by the quality of the internship experience. For example, if students are not challenged in their internships, and instead assigned more menial tasks, they are less likely to have a positive experience (Stratta, 2004; Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, the quality of on-site supervision has also been linked to student outcomes (Hardin et al., 2021). Therefore, research has been done on establishing these opportunities effectively, especially as there are many challenges to implementing successful internships.

Williams (2004) identified four primary challenges to implementation of a successful internship in sport. First, there are several barriers to the recruitment of interns, as internships in sport organizations are very competitive (Braunstein-Minkove et al., 2024). Many sport organizations have overly detailed recruitment criteria, as they expect the most high-quality interns. However, these qualifications may eliminate a large pool of students who may otherwise be successful. Additionally, sport organizations are most likely to accept interns through recommendations from individuals and departments in which they already have a relationship. Finally, time require-

ments often differ from that of academic schedules, and therefore student availability is a concern for many host organizations (Williams, 2004). Second, the professionalism and preparedness of a student is considered key for the host organization (Williams, 2004). Third, the structure of the internship can cause challenges. Many internships are unpaid, but many students need or would certainly like compensation of some sort for their time (Walker et al., 2021). Finally, the level of responsibility of the intern supervisor is many times a barrier. There needs to be clear expectations between the academic program and the supervisor on the expectations of the role before they hire an intern (Williams, 2004).

Williams (2004) concludes that one of the most important factors to a successful internship for both the student and the sport organization is a quality relationship between the internship site and the academic department, which ensures the student is getting a quality experience and that the sport organization is getting quality work from the student. This further emphasizes the importance of all partners in an effective internship experience (Brown et al., 2018) and underscores the importance of research on the experiences of these stakeholders in establishing internship opportunities.

Similar challenges, aside from challenges with working in nontraditional social work environments, have been documented in establishing social work practicum placement opportunities. Research has pointed to the need for more practicum instructor training (Spector & Infante, 2020), the lack of quality organizations and lack of qualified internship supervisors (Dhemba, 2012), the importance of the student-supervisor relationship (Bogo et al., 2022), and the limited sites that can offer opportu-

nities for a generalist practice experience (Teigiser, 2009). To meet these challenges, Wertheimer and Sodhi (2014) present a model that places practicum coordinators as the primary liaison between the social work department and the community and host organizations. Similarly, Boitel and Fromm (2014) contend that the integrated practicum contract, developed by the university's practicum placement office that outlines learning expectations is the foundation to a successful practicum experience for the organization and the student intern, as it explicitly states what is expected of the internship or task supervisor. This positions practicum offices and staff as one of the key organizational players that are influential in creating new and innovative practicum partnerships (Sowa, 2009). Social work practicum coordinators have a prominent role in establishing effective internships in both social work and sport settings. Therefore, the focus of this research was examining, through the lens of constraints theory, the challenges and constraints they faced in working with sport organizations.

Theoretical Framework: Constraints Theory

Constraints are circumstances or factors that limit, prohibit, or prevent someone from participating in or pursuing an opportunity. Constraint theory has its conceptual foundation in leisure studies dating to the early 1960s in examining why people did not participate in outdoor sports and recreation activities (Ferris, 1962; Jackson et al., 1993, 2000; Mueller et al., 1962). Crawford and Godbey (1987) continued to develop the conceptual model of constraints and developed three categories of constraints: (a) intrapersonal – factors that limit participation related to individual attributes, (b) interperson-

al – factors that limit participation as the result of relationships with others, and (c) structural – factors that limit participation due to the situational and environment aspects.

Research in sport has broadly examined several constraint dimensions that may negatively influence participation in a plethora of different types of sporting events as well as the influence of motivations and emotional attachment may have on constraints (e.g., Anaza et al., 2013; Funk et al., 2009; Kim & Trail, 2010; Ridinger & Funk, 2007; Trail & Kim, 2011). This research highlights the notion that sport organizations and administrators would have some control on alleviating or diminishing these barriers. This same concept can be applied to the current study in the examination of social work students who want to pursue internships in sport organizations. As social work internships in sport settings are a relatively new concept, social work programs may face intra-, inter-, and structural constraints in trying to place students in sport settings, and field practicum staff may have some control in diminishing such barriers. Therefore, constraints theory was used to understand the experiences of social work practicum staff establishing practicum placements in sport organizations.

Method

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to understand what constraints social work practicum staff have to negotiate during the planning process when establishing a social work internship in a sport setting. Narrative inquiry is the investigation of human experience through individuals' stories (Riessman, 2008; Webster & Mertova, 2020). Therefore, data collection and analysis centered on participants' planning stories of establishing practicum

placements with sport organizations. The study was approved by the authors' Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants

Participants were recruited via the Alliance for Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) listserv, the CSWE listserv, from professional contacts, and from publicly available university email addresses of practicum placement staff. Recruitment was based on purposeful criterion sampling (Patton, 2015), where specific characteristics need to be met prior to participation in the study. The criterion for this study were social work practicum staff employed, in a faculty or administrative role, at CSWE-accredited social work departments that has either currently placed or has placed in the past a bachelors-level (BSW) or masters-level (MSW) social work student at a sport organization. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Data Collection

Participants completed the informed consent form prior to the first interview. Participants participated in two narrative interviews: the narration phase, where the researcher can ask participants to tell their story of the experience of interest (Clandinin & Johnson, 2017), in this case establishing an internship in a sport organization, and the conversation phase, when the interview becomes more semi-structured, and the researcher can ask clarifying questions and further elicit stories from their participants. Overall, the narrative interviews focused on collecting stories about the planning process of practicum placements with sport organizations. After completion of the second interview, the first author transcribed and de-identified all interviews. The average recorded length of all interviews was 57 minutes.

Data Analysis

Data was then transferred to Google Sheets for narrative analysis. The first phase of analysis focused on separating the data into story stanzas (Labov, 1972; Riessman, 2008). Then, a narrative thematic analysis was completed to analyze the actual content of the story, identifying themes in each individual story and then themes across stories that create a larger narrative (Riessman, 2008). Riessman (2008) notes that there are four main differences between other types of thematic analyses and narrative thematic analysis. First, prior theory guides the analytical process in narrative thematic analysis. Specifically, this study was guided by constraints theory (e.g., Crawford & Godbey, 1987). Second, se-

quence is preserved, and third, analysis still attended to time and place, which are essential elements of narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); thus, this narrative thematic analysis was completed in story stanzas. Fourth, narrative thematic analysis remains case-centered (Riessman, 2008), and in this case, social work practicum placements in sport settings. This preserves the narrative way of knowing, which organizes knowledge through sequences rather than through categorizing (Riessman, 1993).

Fidelity of the Narrative Data

Kim (2016) argues that the fidelity of narrative research lies in the researchers' honoring of the participants words. Specifically, this was accomplished in

this study through member-checking, as well as the aforementioned process of analyzing data in story stanzas, and then presenting findings as contextual stories, rather than solely as decontextualized quotes. In this project, member-checking took place at two points in the research process (Brit et al., 2016; Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). Each participant was sent a copy of the initial transcription after each of their interviews, and they were asked to check the transcript for accuracy and make any needed changes. The participants were then sent a copy of the consolidated results after all analysis was complete to review. They were asked to assess the accuracy of their narratives and the interpreted results, and to make any suggestions for changes or edits to items that may have

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Licensed	Highest Degree	Position
Dante	Male	White	53	Yes	PhD	Associate Director of Practicum (Former)/Faculty
Ella	Female	Caucasian	46	Yes	MSW	Assistant Practicum Coordinator
Leo	Male	White	67	Yes	MSW	Practicum Instructor/Practicum Coordinator
Merritt	Female	White	39	Yes	MSW	Practicum Coordinator
Ryan	Male	Caucasian	70	Yes	MSW	Practicum Instructor/Practicum Coordinator
Sarah	Female	White	42	Yes	MSW	Director of Practicum Education
Toni	Female	Caucasian	54	Yes	MSW	Assistant Practicum Director
Ty	Female	German American	53	Formerly	MSW	Assistant Dean of Practicum Education

Note. All information was self-identified by participants.

been misinterpreted. One participant responded that they did not have edits, two participants responded with further edits to clarify their stories, and five participants did not respond.

Positionality Statement

Due to the constructivist nature of this narrative inquiry (Hollingsworth & Dybdahl, 2007), it is important for the authors to acknowledge their positionality, which influenced each part of the research process. The lead researcher is a licensed social worker, as well as holds a PhD in sport management. This interdisciplinary training allowed for interpretation of the planning process from both a social work and sport management understanding. The second author is a tenured faculty member in a sport management program at a large university in the Southeast. He has extensive experience in administering internships in sport settings for students pursuing degrees in sport management. He has also assisted in cultivating and developing internship opportunities for students. He also has experience working in the collegiate environment, so he has an understanding of the sport culture.

Findings

Three themes were constructed from participants' planning stories: (a) insider/outsider status, (b), differences between elite and community sport, and (c) gatekeeping.

Insider/Outsider Status

Throughout the planning stories of the participants, it became clear that participants were coming into the partnership as outsiders. However, every participant negotiated their outsider positionality by positioning themselves as an insider to sport culture. Each participant discussed their own realization that

social work belongs in sport contexts, by discussing their own sporting experiences. Ella, for example, shared how her own experience as a college athlete opened her eyes to need for athletes to have access to behavioral health services:

I started out at (a university) and played for a year and then red-shirted my sophomore year, and then I transferred to (another university), and then played three years there. So, in looking at the transition of transfers and seeing the support that they could have been given...there was a lot of academic support, and what I saw with my teammates, there was a lot of academic support, but not social-emotional support.

Sarah similarly connected the work of a colleague focused on fan etiquette to her own experience, reflecting, "As a parent, even personally, I'm just kind of fascinated with that whole thing. Going to my kiddos' sports and seeing the wide variety of spectator behavior and how that influences athletes." Other participants spoke about moments during their sport fandom that opened their eyes to the human issues that athletes face. Dante, for instance, remembered the story of a star basketball player for his undergraduate institution: "...he was hot property. And two years later, he was homeless and penniless. And you know, I remember feeling like something's wrong with this scenario where someone can be celebrated so much, and then the next thing, you know, they're out in the street." Every participant shared their own, insider story of social work in sport, which was influential in their own advocacy for sport social work.

Interestingly, participants used such insider experiences to gain initial buy-in for sport-based practicum placements. This was done in three ways. First, for

participants who had a background as an athlete, they used their athlete experiences to gain buy-in. Second, some participants strategically adapted part of the sport culture in their negotiations. And third, for participants with limited or no background in sport, they found an insider to help them in the planning process. For participants who had a background in sport, their identity as an athlete was key to initially gaining acceptance from the sport organizations' gatekeepers. Ella, who was a collegiate athlete, explained how her athletic background helped her gain acceptance,

I used a lot of my own experiences as a student-athlete in college and kind of sharing what my experience was, what I saw, and so I had to rely a lot on my own athletic experience, and there was a lot of banter about everyone's own athletic experience. So, that was a common shared experience that made it all relatable, and not just some random person coming in (to the athletic department) saying, "Hey, I want to have interns here."

Merritt similarly recalled that her experience as a former student-athlete helped her in the initial conversations that she had with the athletic department at her campus, stating, "There are just those pieces that I think for what we're doing, we're working with (athletics), that you know about in a different way than just maybe hearing about it, just having that experience. So, I think maybe it legitimizes a little bit." Ryan explained that when he first began working with sport organizations, he "wasn't as versed" in sport culture, but could rely on "my own experience in coaching" to contextualize his conversations with the athletic department at his institution.

Another strategy some participants used to position oneself as an insider was to match the business-like nature of sport organizations, which was different than approaching a traditional social work organization. Dante, for example, discussed how in working with more business-oriented organizations, such as elite sport organizations, he and his colleague approached discussions about practicum placements from a “closer mentality.” Merritt shared a similar sentiment, recalling a story of her first meeting with a community-based sport organization, whose program director had a background in elite college sport. She explained,

In the beginning, (they were) kind of standoffish, just like, “Social work?” You can just tell. You get the vibe (they are) not really sure. So, I’m selling and working it, then we get to the end, they were like, “We don’t have a social worker here,” or something, and I said, “You don’t have one yet!” And they looked at me, and had bought in.

Merritt reflected that she believed this approach worked because it was “strong and direct.”

Finally, for individuals without a background in sport, they relied on relationships with insiders to help them establish practicum placements in a sport organization. Both Sarah and Toni relied on relationships with social work faculty members who worked with sport organizations already. For example, Ty used the insider perspective of a colleague who was “50% with our program and 50% there (in the athletic department)” to assure the success of the practicum placement. As she explained, this colleague told her, “In order for this (the practicum placement) to happen, we need to do all these things.’ So, I said, ‘Okay. We will do all those

things.’” Thus, although participants approached negotiating their outsider positionality in different ways, positioning oneself as an insider was an essential step in the planning process.

Differences Between Elite and Community Sport

Throughout each participant’s planning stories, there were clear differences between the process of planning a practicum placement with an elite sport organization, primarily collegiate athletic departments and professional sport organizations, and the process of planning a practicum placement with community-based sport organizations, such as youth sports and high school sports. Many of these differences were related to the cultural differences of organizations.

Several of the participants consistently discussed the culture of elite athletics as a closed system. Ryan described the difficulty in gaining access to the athletic department, for both him and for students who may be interested in an internship, as “I don’t know if it’s like this all over, but the athletic department here is sort of a cloistered unit. They don’t like to talk about what happens or what they do inside the athletic department.” Indeed, a few participants, when speaking about the culture of elite collegiate athletics, likened it to the military. Laughing somewhat, Ty explained,

Athletics is...kind of an entity unto itself, a fortress. I think last time I made the parallel to a military culture, like they have their way of doing things, and I don’t mean to place blame at all. I think that the reality is, they are dealing with a lot of different tensions and pressures. They’ve got the NCAA, rightfully, monitoring them, and making sure that

they’re held accountable, so that means that they have a lot of rules and structure in place, so it’s a big bureaucracy. And it is insular by design. It’s designed to kind of protect the players, to protect the program to protect the coaches. In terms of a closed system versus an open system. It’s a much more closed system.

Ty’s description of the athletic department as a closed, military-like system opened her story about how, it “just felt different” than work with other agencies, even though the process of establishing the practicum placement with the athletic department was similar (i.e., same timeline, same official forms). Ty concluded that her work with the athletic department on campus was more about gaining appropriate approval. She stated, “In many ways, it was a more, certainly more confidential space, so it was like I was applying for higher levels of clearance with the FBI.”

Tellingly, some participants also discussed that the closed off nature of elite athletics limited the ability to establish a partnership. For example, Dante, in describing his experience of trying to establish a practicum placement in his former institution’s athletic department, told the story of why the placement never happened, even though they were able to get an initial meeting. He began the story describing the athletic department as a “closed system” and one that does not want “prying eyes.” He continued, recounting a meeting he had with the athletic department’s academic advising staff,

I remember doing a presentation to them, and just kind of talking with their leadership, and it just got squashed, and we were really hopeful that it could happen, and we kind of pushed back to where like, “...the (academic)

advis(ing), some of that could be a good internship, but we also would like to do some counseling with the students. We would like to be involved with them in other ways.” And they were like, “That’s a little too much for us.” So, they were going to prescribe the terms of how they wanted the services to be delivered. I think they were concerned about what might happen if others got involved. So, it ultimately didn’t transpire.

To overcome the challenges of working with a closed off and protective system, many participants pointed to the importance of being explicit and transparent in the planning process. For example, Ty stated she had to be prepared, which starts with “sharing lots of documents.” She continued explaining, “Which you know of course we always do, but I got the impression that they read them.” In reflecting on the formality of this process. Ella, who has worked on placements both in her institution’s athletic department and at a local community college athletic department, stated that her main strategy was to validate the athletic departments’ concerns about bringing in a social work intern: “I did a lot of validating and reassuring about respecting the culture and understanding and demonstrating that I had enough awareness to know, so really, that was really the kind of main thing I tried to convey.”

Many of the participants also placed students in community and youth sport organizations, where sport was used as one of the primary forms of intervention. Interestingly, whereas the stories surrounding elite sport focused on the closed off nature of the organization, the stories surrounding community sport did not indicate challenges establishing a partnership with the organizations, but challenges ensuring interns were

getting the opportunities to engage in meaningful learning activities. For example, Leo told a story of a student he was working with who was placed in a youth sport organization that used squash as an activity with the participants. The student intern was initially not getting much specific social work-related learning activities,

The first student that was there said, “I really like it there, and I love working with the kids, but I’m basically just playing with them, and they’re teaching me how to play squash, and the kids love that. They’d say, “Oh, yeah, come on, (student name), we’re going to show you how to do it.” And that was the way of them to sort of test her out and build a relationship with her, and they always want her to play squash. So, she was willing to do that, but then I had to work with the practicum instructor and have a meeting and say, “Now let’s see what we could do to move this to the next level.”

Like with the elite sport organizations, overcoming the challenges of working with community sport organizations also involved clear communication and expectations so that the participants were certain the interns were having meaningful work experiences, such as Leo’s follow-up conversation with the administrator at the youth sport organization. Sarah also explained that her worries that a student may not participate in meaningful social work activities were quickly quelled by how organized the on-site task supervisor was: “One of the things that (the practicum instructor) did that I liked is he actually typed up a weekly to-do list for her. So, in addition to her learning contract, and not very many instructors or agency supervisors do that, so that

was kind of unusual, and very much appreciated for her.” Thus, clear communication and expectations were similarly important in work with community sport organizations.

Overall, the cultural context of the sport organizations, whether a community sport organization or an elite sport organization, was clearly important to participants’ telling of their planning stories. Tellingly, many of the orientations of their stories focused on describing the culture of the organization or of sport generally to contextualize their reasons for certain actions in their planning process.

Gatekeeping

The theme of gatekeeping appeared solely in the planning stories related to elite sport organizations. Gatekeeping happened in two ways across the stories of the participants who worked with elite sport organizations. First, the participants experienced gatekeeping themselves in that it was difficult to get initial meetings with a sport administrator, so they stressed finding the “right” person. Second, many of the participants discussed how there was gatekeeping related to student access to internships in elite sport organizations, as organizations would only take certain types of students.

In describing the general process of establishing practicum placements, Sarah captured the importance of finding the person who is the gatekeeper in the organization, or the person who can make the decision if the organization can take an intern. She suggests that a successful practicum partnership begins by “getting to the right person.” Leo agreed. In recounting his initial efforts to establish a relationship with the athletic department at his institution. He recalled being strategic in choosing to reach out to one of the assistant ath-

letic directors, who had a background in social work and was foundational in setting up the department's student counseling services. Due also to this administrator's close relationship to the head football coach, Leo knew that "he was a person that I wanted to cultivate a relationship with."

Dante's experience setting up a placement with the local Major League Baseball (MLB) team also exemplified the importance of meeting with the right people, which he described as the decision makers. He recalled the meeting he had with the sport administrators about calculating the payment for an outside social work practicum instructor, because the organization did not have a social worker on staff, as well as for a stipend for the social work intern. He described this conversation as,

I remember distinctly with the (local MLB team), we were sitting in the conference room, which is just unbelievable, having this conversation with their management around the program, and you know, they had me ask the closing question, "Can you pay for an instructor? Can you pay the stipend?" They said yes to the stipend, no to the instructor... They could say on the spot whether they were going to do it or not.

He concluded that this was a benefit of working with an elite sport organization, as, in those initial meetings, he was already meeting with the organization's senior staff. Ella shared a similar experience that highlighted the importance of getting the buy-in from the right person. In her work the athletic department at her university, she had spoken to many different individuals in athletics in the hopes to set up the internship, but it was not until she got a meeting with an assistant athletic director, who held one of the highest positions in the athletic

department, that the internship opportunity was established. As she described, "Everyone kept saying, "Yeah, yeah," like, 'We've tried, we're trying,' (but) then I met with the assistant athletic director, and she was full on board." As Ella's story suggests, it was essential for the participants working with elite sport organizations to find the decision-maker, or the gatekeeper, whose approval was needed for the practicum placement to be established.

Ella's work with the assistant athletic director also exemplified the gatekeeping that happened with students. In her initial conversations with the assistant athletic director about the possibility of a social work internship in the athletic department, Ella stated specifically, "And (the assistant athletic director) said, 'I don't think this could work with anyone who's not a former student-athlete or an athlete themselves.'" Both Ryan and Leo mentioned similar attitudes from the athletic department at their institution. Ryan described the view of the athletic department as, "They like to pick their students, they always (have a background) with sports." Leo believed this was an ethical dilemma, as he explained his experience with the athletic department,

I wanted the opportunities to do a placement to be open to everybody, but they wanted more, at the athletic department, more of an elite athlete. Now our other placements... they were open to taking anybody, which I really liked. But in, at (the university), we did have a problem with them wanting just the elite athletes, and many times they wanted somebody that they knew already, which I thought was really sort of an exclusive club attitude, you know, like, "Well, you're in the club," you know, "We'll take you.

The other people we don't want."

Ryan agreed this was an ethical dilemma, stating "In my mind, that's a little bit of a dilemma, because I don't think it really conforms to (diversity, equity, and inclusion) principles." In recounting a story of placing a recent student, who was a former soccer player, in the athletic department, Ryan reflected on his own role in the process,

I referred a student there last year, who, well did play soccer, but I told her to contact our connection (in the athletic department), so I said, "You want to meet her." So, they want people with that kind of background. So, I'm kind of facilitating that process, but it's a dilemma for me, how do students get referred. They don't like it to be completely open, because then, like some of our placements that become very popular, they don't want to have to sift through 25 applications for one spot, (or) interview 25 students for one spot.

Another diversity, equity, and inclusion ethical issue was raised by Ty. Ty described the athletic department at her university as, "Almost all of the employees within (university's) athletics are White, and the majority, of the employees that are within (university's) athletics are White. The majority of athletes, student-athletes, are BIPOC." Therefore, she discussed how it was important to place BIPOC student interns in the athletic department to work with the student-athletes. However, due to the culture of the athletic department, this has proven difficult. Ty described one specific instance of trying to place a student in a placement at the athletic department,

We had a candidate for that placement, who was a young Black male and he applied for the placement. He and I met and

talked about it individually, and I was encouraging this and that and my understanding from him was that he didn't really want that placement...he went a different direction, and it seemed a really good fit for him. That was my take on it. But then, (a colleague) reached back after the fact, and said, "What happened? How come this guy didn't get it?" You know, "Why did they pick another White female?" And so, we had a frank conversation about that, and we continue to advocate and try to direct BIPOC candidates to them, because that would better match the predominant population.

Interestingly, both Ty and Ella spoke about how they had to be selective in the students they spoke to about the opportunities for a practicum placement in a sport organization due to the limited number of partnerships. Ella shared her approach to recruiting students for sport-specific practicum placements: "I have to kind of be careful, because I don't want to talk about (it) too much, because then if I get, you know, five or six students and they really want to, and right now we have barely one or two (partnerships with sport organizations)."

Taken together, the protective nature of the elite sport culture led to an increased need for the social work practicum staff to identify and get acceptance from the right gatekeeper, as well as the sport organization's preference for a specific type of intern, which ultimately hindered equitable access to these internships. This inequitable access may then be further exacerbated by the limited number of internships available, leading some practicum staff to not advertise the internships to all students.

Discussion

The findings suggest participants in this study faced intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints when working to establish a non-traditional social work internship with a sport organization. It is also important to consider that the constraints must be negotiated in a hierarchical manner (Koo et al., 2017). Intrapersonal constraints must first be overcome in that there is an awareness that sport organizations are viable organizations for social work practicums, which ultimately stemmed from the participants negotiating their own positionality. Relationships and trust must then be established with sport organizations' staff members and athletes to negotiate interpersonal constraints. These relationships are critical to gain access for the opportunity for an internship. Finally, structural constraints must be overcome as the organizational structure influences the planning experiences. Therefore, practicum placement coordinators need to have an awareness of the dynamics of the various athletic structures.

Intrapersonal Constraints

Intrapersonal constraints reference the challenges that one must overcome individually in the planning process (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). The first such challenge or constraint suggested in the literature is the lack of awareness that sport is a viable option for a social work practicum placement site. Sport is an emerging area of social work practice so many practicum placement staff members may not be aware of the opportunities in the sport industry (Magier et al., 2023). The simple notion that sport (or recreation) organizations present an opportunity for practicum placement sites may not be known to social work BSW or MSW staff mem-

bers. Further, students typically do not enter the social work profession with aspirations of working in sports organizations, and they are unaware of this career path in social work (Beasley et al., 2021). Traditional practicum placements may be associated with schools, nursing homes, state agencies, emergency shelters, rehabilitation centers, and other community serving organizations. This lack of recognition by both educators and students is perpetuated by the absence of the topic in the social work higher education setting (Beasley et al., 2021; Magier et al., 2023). There are classes devoted toward social work opportunities in other settings, such as school social work (Bosma et al., 2010), but there are limited classes or class modules focused on the sport setting. Thus, there is an overall lack of recognition of the sport setting itself as an opportunity by practicum placement coordinators, students, and faculty.

In participants' planning stories, they each identified as an insider to sport in some way (e.g., fan, coach, etc.), which opened their eyes to the role of social work in sport. This insider status was then used to gain initial buy-in for the practicum placements, especially as they were seen as an outsider in many of the elite sport organizations. Such an identity negotiation between insider and outside status in sport was the primary way participants overcome the intrapersonal constraint of outsider status, which could otherwise have limited personal acceptance of the emerging field of social work in sport or have created barriers to initial buy-in from sport organizations. True to the hierarchical nature of constraints (Koo et al., 2017), once the practicum staff members recognized the role of social work in sport and positioned themselves as an insider, they then had to navigate the intrapersonal constraint of the lack

of trust of gatekeepers, which required developing a relationship with the gatekeepers at those organizations.

Interpersonal Constraints

Many participants began building relationships with potential placement sites through cold-calling, meeting individuals at professional events (i.e., conferences, alumni events), and tapping into the networks of their friends and colleagues. Trust in the relationships were established through being open, transparent, in consistent contact, and setting clear expectations of the internship partnership. This takes continual relationship building, frequent interactions, and open communication between all parties involved. Sport management literature has also suggested that building trust and rapport through the setting of clear expectations is the foundation to any successful interorganizational partnership (Babiak & Willem, 2016).

Throughout the participants' planning stories, the network of individuals they built through these relationships was an important resource in establishing practicum placements, whether their connections became practicum instructors themselves or helped them get an "in" with a sport organization. Developing and leveraging one's social capital, defined in management (Lin, 2001) and sport management (Wicker et al., 2016) literature as someone's relationships and social network, seems the first step in building social work internships in sport organizations. Overall, at the intrapersonal level, participants in this study invested time and resources to educate themselves to build stronger relationships and a larger network that supports the social work in sport movement, which ultimately created more buy-in and opportunities for social work internships.

Structural Constraints

The third aspect of gaining access is the willingness of both the organization itself to want the services provided by social workers and allow for the practicum placement of an intern, and for the social work department to accept such a structure of an internship. Although there has been a shift in the sport industry towards prioritizing the well-being of athletes and coaches in sport (Waller et al., 2016), overall organizational commitment is still lacking (Beasley et al., 2021), perhaps due to the mental health stigma prominent in sport culture (Breslin et al., 2019; Kern et al., 2017). Similarly, there has been more and more acceptance of athletes as a population of need by the social work profession (Dean & Rowan, 2014), but there is still some resistance, as discussed by participants in this study. Limited organizational buy-in, in both the social work and sport professions, could result in loss of internship placements.

Overall, from the organization's side, there are multiple layers of organizational structures that must be negotiated prior to a sport organization becoming a viable placement site. Part of this negotiation at the structural level involves getting approval throughout the organization for a practicum placement. So, the practicum placement coordinator must not only gain the trust and confidence of the initial contact within department but also other administrators, such as coaches. It seemed the most successful strategy used by participants was presenting themselves as an insider to sport, by sharing their own sporting experiences. However, such an insider status also led to ethical issues around student selection. This included the practicum staff having to navigate the organization wanting the "right" student, which was compounded by di-

versity, equity, and inclusion challenges reproduced in both sport (e.g., Singer et al., 2022) and social work (e.g., Black-Deer & Ocampo, 2022), suggesting structural constraints, such as racial bias, needed to be negotiated by participants.

The cultural contexts of the organization also created unique structural constraints. Specifically, the different organizational contexts of community-based sport organizations versus elite sport organizations created different challenges in the planning process. Elite sport organizations were significantly more closed off than youth and community sport organizations, related to the protective nature of the organizations. Several of the participants in their story orientations described elite sport organizations as "military-like." The intersection of elite sport culture and military culture is not uncommon in sport management and sport studies literature, with scholars examining the militarization of American sport (i.e., Ternes, 2016; Vasquez III, 2020).

At a practical level, the participants in this study were noticing and experiencing the military-like culture of elite sport. On the other hand, youth and community sport organizations were not closed off and were easier for participants to establish initial relationships. Even so, challenges centered on ensuring that social work interns still had opportunities to practice the CSWE (2015a) competencies. Consequently, in work with youth and community sport organizations, the participants were more intentional in assessing the student learning activities through formal and informal formative evaluations, whereas more work was needed to be done on the frontend with elite sport organizations.

Implications

For social work practicum staff looking to continue working with sport organizations or for social work practicum staff interested in beginning to place social work students interns in sport organizations, the findings speak to the complexity of the planning process, especially with the gatekeeping apparent in elite sport organizations. Finding ways to position oneself as an insider to sport culture could be an effective strategy in building initial relationships. However, building organizational buy-in and commitment may be the most difficult. It is recommended to build relationships with sport management and kinesiology faculty and educating them on the social work profession and social work in sport. Then, bring these sport management and kinesiology faculty into the internship planning process to leverage their insider knowledge and understanding of sport as well as their already established relationships with sport organizations.

To overcome all levels of constraints, the participants planning stories also highlight the importance of deconstructing stigma around social work in sport, both in the sport setting and in the social work field. Therefore, social work practicum staff must include education and advocacy efforts in their planning processes through interdisciplinary efforts such as webinars, conferences, courses, and continuing education-unit opportunities (Antle et al., 2021; Beasley et al., 2022b). These efforts should intentionally include educational campaigns for athletic administrators prior to any conversations about social work internships to decrease misconceptions and eliminate some of the educational work at the beginning of building of the relationships.

Furthermore, due to the com-

petitive nature of internships in sport organizations and the fact that sport organizations tend to base future hiring of interns on experiences with past interns (Williams, 2004), it may be that sport organizations are not accepting social work (or other behavioral health professions) interns due to previous negative experiences. To combat this, there is an onus on social work education to effectively prepare students to work with sport populations. This can include educating students in coursework on psychometrically validated assessment tools (e.g., The International Olympic Committee [IOC] Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool 1 [SMHAT-1] and Sport Mental Health Recognition Tool 1 [SMHRT-1]; Gouttebauge et al., 2021) and their use and limitations with specific athlete populations (e.g., Cohen-Young, 2024; Gavrilova et al., 2024), as well as evidence-based interventions with sport populations (see for example the special issue published in the *Sport Social Work Journal*; Beasley & Newman, 2024). These efforts can be woven into the traditional social work curricula or can be in the form of full classes dedicated to sport social work (Clark, 2022). Indeed, faculty and administrators should continually evaluate curriculum to ensure the needs of students are met, and emerging topics are being included in the curriculum (Pate et al., 2023). Such education could set the foundation for a social work intern to have a successful practicum experience and subsequently the sport organization may be more willing to host future social work interns.

Conversely, athletic administrators, with support from the social work practicum staff, should consider including this information in athlete orientations and training, so that athletes have the knowledge of who is providing services (Beasley et al., 2022a; Beasley

et al., 2021). These orientation sessions can include education on the full scope of practice and services that social workers can provide. This will help decrease stigma and assist in establishing relationships. Ultimately, as the social work profession continues to expand into nontraditional settings, such as sport, social work practicum departments will also need to continue to innovate.


Limitations and Future Research


Social work in sport is an ever-growing field, and there has been an increase in the number of social work departments offering sport-specific learning opportunities in sport settings since the time of data collection. Exemplifying this growth, the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports (ASWIS) released a guide related to creating practicum partnerships with sport organizations and in the sport settings (Beasley et al., n.d.). Therefore, data collected in this study does not capture such growth, and several participants could only speak to experiences working with one or two organizations. Future studies could thus provide more insight on the growth of these internships—including perhaps more discussions of the success of sustainability efforts. Furthermore, due to the infancy of opportunities at the time of data collection, recruitment efforts focused on practicum staff who worked with any type of sport organization. Future research could then benefit from using case study methodology to focus on the nuances of practicum placements in different settings, such as youth sport organizations, college sport organizations, elite sport organizations, as well as placements where sport is used as an intervention in social work practice.

Conclusion

As sport social work continues to grow, there is an increased need for sport-based social work practicum placements, both to meet the educational needs of social work students and to meet the need of sport organizations. The insights offered by participants in this study can provide current and future social work practicum staff working with sport organizations insight on navigating the complexities of the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural constraints in such planning processes.

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