sport management

The experience of student volunteers in sport

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Aim of paper and research questions

In the United Kingdom a variety of programmes and initiatives have been established to create pathways into sport volunteering for young people. One of the problems is that these programmes are built on principles and practices drawn from the mainstream volunteer literature which is predominately based on adults. Unfortunately, research into younger volunteers is relatively underdeveloped. The focus of this study is to explore the experience of student volunteers and thereby provide the managers of sporting organisations and events a better understanding of their younger workers. Specifically the research will examine:

1. What are the motives, needs, and expectations of students that volunteer in sport?
2. What factors contribute to students' initial satisfaction and the initial benefits of the experience?
3. What factors contribute to students' long term involvement in volunteering in sport?

Literature review

Whilst the literature on involvement in the work environment is rather well developed (Steers, Mowday & Shapiro, 2004; & Ramiall, 2004), the understanding of the volunteer experience is rather superficial and the experience of young volunteers is even less understood. The literature is generally restricted to examinations of the motives people provide for initiating their involvement (see Horton Smith, 1994), however, a volunteer's motives are unlikely to remain constant for the full term of his or her involvement (Caldwell & Andereck, 1994; Hibbert, Piacentini & Dajani, 2003). For example, motives and expectations are likely to change as volunteers become more involved in the decision-making processes of the organisation and as they rise in the organisation's hierarchy; and the reasons that attract a person are unlikely to be identical to those reasons associated with their long-term retention. In their research into long term volunteering, Cuskelly and Harrington (1997) concluded that, "…existing conceptualisations of volunteering may not adequately capture the essence of what it is to be a volunteer nor the breath of the volunteer experience (p. 54)".

Research design and proposed data analysis

The study will follow the experience of a group of students as they progress through the 'volunteer life cycle' (Beugen, 1985). Stage 1 is when the student forms an initial interest in volunteering. Stage 2 is when he or she has had their initial contact with the organisation and is deciding whether the organisation is the right 'fit'. Stage 3 occurs at the completion of the first season or event and it is at this point that volunteers are contemplating their longer term commitment to the organisation. This paper will present the initial analysis of the first stage.

In Stage 1 a series of semi-structured interviews (17 in total) were undertaken with student volunteers (Stages 2 & 3 will be follow-up interviews with these 17 students as they continue their [non-] involvement). Students were recruited during the orientation week of university

as they 'signed-up' for a variety of clubs, sports, and to volunteer in a range of cultural, social, and sporting organisations. Interview questions were open-ended and contained a number of prompts that allowed the researcher to explore a variety of issues. Furthermore, themes and topics of interest that emerged from early interviews were incorporated into subsequent interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, was audio recorded and then transcribed to facilitate analysis. A grounded approach similar to that advocated by Esterberg (2002) and Coffey and Atkinson (1996) was be used to analyse the interviews – to identify the relevant phenomena and to develop meanings.

Discussion of progress

Preliminary analyses of the interviews suggest that students develop a variety of psychological connections with volunteering. Four main 'types' were identifiable. The first group were psychological connected to the principle of volunteering. This group were happy to help out in any organisation or event. Their satisfaction appeared to be related to being able to help others in any shape or form. The second group were psychologically connected to a particular sport or activity. This group were content as long as they had the chance to participate in their sport. The third group were psychologically connected to a particular organisation. This group were looking for opportunities to volunteer in organisations with which they had some allegiance to the mission and objectives of the organisation. The final group saw volunteering as a route into a full time career and were looking for opportunities to enhance their CV and gain valuable work experience. The presentation will examine each of these 'types' in depth and discuss the recruitment and retention implications for sport organisations.

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