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Essay

If You Build It, They Will Come: Developing a Sports Media Major

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Consumer demand for sports media has never been stronger, yet sports media studies have long been a low priority in traditional journalism programs. For some reason professional sports writing and sports broadcast production has long been looked upon as the strange cousin of journalism: not really news, not really promotion, and not really considered “real media” except through some bizarre DNA configuration.

After several years of success with a strong sports broadcasting club, Oklahoma State University recently established a B.A. and B.S. in Sports Media through the School of Journalism and Broadcasting to train undergraduates to work in this growing field.

In the Beginning...

Nearly 20 years ago, one of our professors was approached by enterprising students who were interested in setting up at football and basketball games and taping an audio broadcast of the event. Funding was appropriated for two headset microphones, a mixer, and a cassette machine. The athletic department courageously awarded full access season passes for this student project. After each event, the students would edit down their tapes and be evaluated by professionals.

Word spread quickly and a sports media production course for broadcast majors was proposed, which was eagerly approved by administration. The practicum remained an independent club and open for all university students. However, with the opportunity

to become more visible within the campus community (and to be able to receive student government funding), three years ago the Sports Media Club was accepted as a student government sanctioned campus organization.

As the club gained popularity and the initial sports production course filled, our faculty and students began to build strong relationships with the university athletic department and perhaps, more importantly, with professional sports broadcasters and reporters who were coming to campus to cover events.

Cover the Uncovered

Sending amateurs to cover sporting events does present interesting challenges for students and athletic departments. With the stranglehold most athletic departments have due to coverage rights, media access is granted to a very elite consortium. While a limited number of select students were allowed to work the big games, most were assigned to cover the lower profile events that would allow students a real-world atmosphere. They shot video, produced packages, wrote stories and did the play-by-play for soccer, softball, baseball, intramurals, and high school sports. As students gained experience, they developed the necessary skills used in all sports journalism and broadcasting. This experience was embraced by the industry, especially with high-profile internships.

High school athletics are a perfect venue for producing live or tape-delayed multicamera telecasts of sporting events. Since major events such as university football and basketball are traditionally off limits to student productions or even access to the event as a media representative, we found numerous radio stations, cable access providers, and live streaming outlets were delighted to have our fledgling sportscasters provide multi-camera production play-by-play and color for home and away events.

Another challenge in the past has been receiving airtime via either traditional over-the-air or cable access. That is changing

with the popularity and capability of live streaming and media on-demand access that nearly all colleges have. There is no better learning environment than the pressure of going live.

Creating a New Degree Option

The School began with a simple understanding that training students to work in sports was no different than our more traditional majors. Ultimately, it means researching, writing, creating a message and delivering a target audience to a client. The School recognized the strong desire by students to enter careers connected to sports and the School was fortunate enough to have a number of faculty with strong backgrounds in the field, either as sports writers, editors, broadcasters, public relations, or in sports promotion. The School also had the strength of the Sports Media Club, with a diverse membership from across the campus. Faculty researched the field extensively and found several fine programs that offered coursework, certificates or minors in sports media, but only one other major program with a degree option in sports media (The University of Tennessee). The logical step was to develop a B.A./B.S. program catering to students interested in earning a journalism degree with an emphasis in Sports Media (print, broadcast, or public relations/promotions).

As noted, our first step was research. The School had some anecdotal information about student interest, but nothing solid enough to serve as the basis for the creation of a new program. When we surveyed our own students 56 percent indicated they would be interested in pursuing an academic option in the area of sports communication if one was offered by the School of Journalism and Broadcasting.

Considering that these were our own students, we were persuaded that there might be substantial interest outside of our program as well. In fact, there were three main reasons why the development of this program was in our best interest. One was the ability to gain some visibility—both regionally and nation-

ally—for our program. The second reason was the opportunity to open some doors and seek resources that had previously been unavailable to us. A sports program could do that, and in fact it has done that. The third reason we believed the program was important was its ability to allow us to recruit students, particularly minority students, in ways that were not possible before.

Questions and Challenges

It is important to note that one of the biggest questions we faced was why the School should allocate resources to the development of a sports media program. Like all universities, our School struggles with funding. There was genuine concern that this would cause reduction or even elimination of other programs. How could we cover our traditional sequences if we moved some faculty to teach sports courses? Would it drain resources and personnel more than it would deliver in FTEs? Ultimately, the need to secure our growth was considered most important. When the School underwent an outside program review in 2006, one of the reviewers asserted that “sometimes you can’t wait until you have the resources you need; sometimes you have to make the leap and find a way to secure the resources later.”

The School submitted an application for funding for an Endowed Professorship in Sports Media to a national foundation in 2005, and while the board of that group wanted to wait until the program was officially approved before it looked at the professorship, it found the proposal was worthy enough to make a significant grant just to get the program started. This allowed the School the financial support to conduct all of the painstaking procedural work of preparing promotional materials, visiting other programs across the country, and making plans to move forward that otherwise would not have been possible. After the degree went live, that foundation came through with funding for half of the professorship.

The dean of the College of Arts and Sciences gave his blessing to the plan, the request for program modification made its way through

the channels without discussion, and the program was ultimately approved by the Board of Regents in June of 2006. We were off and running and we haven't slowed a meter. On the first day the degree became officially available, we had 30 majors declare. One year later, we have about 75 declared majors in Sports Media, with more interested and being recruited. We receive phone calls and e-mails daily from prospective students. Our university marketing and enrollment management office is enthusiastic about selling the program to high schools in the region.

Summary

OSU was in a favorable position to develop this program for a number of reasons:

- A strong sports venue due to our association with the Big XII conference.
- Faculty members with outstanding and current experience working with national media organizations.
- Resources to substantially upgrade our broadcast facilities.
- Access to media outlets looking for student assistance.
- A strong campus-recognized student club.

Mostly, we had a commitment from our faculty to tweak the program and courses, to make an investment in faith that we could achieve something larger than we had achieved in the past, and that the success of the Sports Media program would benefit all other sequences.

It was an enormous amount of effort and it required something that is not all that common in higher education: A willingness to do something new. By all accounts, the program is working beyond our expectations. We look forward to a future filled with opportunities for networking, for resources, for student engagement and for our faculty.

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