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From The Field Of

Academia, industry benefit when interaction is encouraged

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BILL SUTTON

Late in the fall, I attended the fourth annual meeting of the Sport Marketing Association, an organization that promotes, in the words of SMA President Michael Mokwa, "advancing research, knowledge and best practices in sport business."

As a founding member of the organization I believed in what sport business academics — like their counterparts in mainstream business disciplines, economics, medicine, information sciences and so forth — have done so admirably for so long: namely, solve problems facing industry, commerce and society.

Academics (meaning teachers and their students) should be partnering with the sports business practitioners to identify and solve problems facing the industry. These problems include customer retention, improving service delivery systems, measuring sponsorship ROI and assessing advertising reach and impact.

The sports industry needs to reconnect sports business and sports business academics to examine the challenges facing the industry and work together to identify new approaches and solutions to these challenges.

I recall an editorial in USA Today written several years ago by Amitai Etzioni, a longtime professor of sociology at Columbia University. In it, he called for the academic community to become public intellectuals. That is, faculty dedicated to teaching and research but incorporating that mission into an industry-based interaction located outside the physical campus boundaries.

Public intellectuals have been used in government roles from the times of the ancient Greeks to the current Bush administration. No administration in my memory has been more visible in using public intellectuals than John F. Kennedy's, which appointed a number of Harvard faculty members to Cabinet positions and policy advisory roles.

Who was not moved by JFK's passionate speech about public service: "Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country."

What can academics do for the sports industry, and what can the industry do for sport business programs?

Productive interaction

There are a number of ways that effective and productive interaction could take place. This could come in the form of consulting, class projects, joint research or even sabbaticals.

I spent my teaching sabbatical from the University of Massachusetts working for NBA Commissioner David Stern. The unintended consequence was a 4 1/2-year absence from the classroom.

The good news, however, is that the insight gained from interacting with Stern and the league



NBA Commissioner David Stern explained that his job is more like that of an investment banker, increasing the value of his investors' accounts.



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executives should benefit my students. After returning from the NBA and joining the faculty of UCF, I had a fertile laboratory and was able to develop programs and implement concepts that I had thought about for years.

Stern has a brilliant marketing mind. He challenged me to look at things from a different perspective. He explained that his job is more like that of an investment banker, increasing the value of his investors' accounts.

By fostering more integration between the academic community and the sports industry, some of the best sport business minds in academia would be linked to those in the industry. The result could be a more strategic, measured, tested and evaluated system in which sports are delivered to consumers.

Unfortunately, at times the term academic suggests someone lacking practical experience or a real understanding of just what the day-to-day requirements of the sports practitioner are. Similarly, the term practitioner to some academics implies someone who has not studied and researched the situation and is making decisions without the data and insight to support them.

Consider a merger of the two approaches, or "pracademics." That is, academics working with the sports industry and its practitioners to improve the products and services of the industry and increase and retain its consumer base.

I also see this merger as affecting the writing, teaching, internship and placement experiences of students who would benefit greatly from such a realigned approach. I envision further opportunities for funded research, guest speakers, development of case studies, co-teaching opportunities and so much more.

Sports business academics assisting research firms in questionnaire development and implementation, and short-term projects with the industry that generate funds for faculty and students alike are all logical outcomes of such a system.

Making it happen

What would it take to make this happen? Very little on the part of the sports industry. The real change must take place in academia, where these activities and interactions would need to be respected and accepted by promotion and tenure committees who, up to now, have dismissed such activities as merely service.

These activities have not been recognized for their research and teaching impact, and their effect upon student development and growth has been in large part ignored.

As a baby boomer and a child of the '60s, I have always appreciated and embraced change. Let's all work together to improve our business and to create a sports industry where decisions are data-based, all alternatives are considered and a delivery system that affects the fan experience in meaningful and positive ways can be created and implemented.

We can only do this together.

Bill Sutton (wsutton@bus.ucf.edu) is associate department head of the DeVos Sport Business Program at the University of Central Florida and is principal of **Bill Sutton & Associates**.

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