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Exploring NIRSA Championship Series Professional Development Opportunities: Understanding Their Perceived Value to the Association

Jacob K. Tingle, Dan Hazlett, and April Flint

The NIRSA Championship Series (Series) is a significant component of NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation (NIRSA). Demonstrated, in part, by the fact that many campus recreational professionals contend the events directly relate to both their institution and the association's mission. The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how NIRSA professionals perceive the value of volunteer experiences at Series events. The research team conducted semistructured interviews with thirteen campus recreation directors. The participants had a median of 28 years in the profession, ($SD = 7.4$), and represented all six NIRSA regions. In describing the benefits of volunteerism at Series events, the directors identified three broad themes, each with numerous subthemes: *Personal Experience (Lifelong learner, Mentors, and Networking)*, *Professional Development (Teamwork, Leadership, Communication, and Training)*, and *Ideal Job Characteristics (Attitude and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors)*. The themes, subthemes, and implications for Series events are discussed. In addition, the authors present suggestions for future research.

Keywords: volunteer management, extramural events, intramural sports, qualitative research, campus recreation, recreational sports

The NIRSA Championship Series (Series) is a significant component of NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation (NIRSA). Many campus recreational professionals contend the events directly relate to the mission of both their institution and the association. Each year the Series hosts more than thirty events with universities and students spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to attend. In addition, more than 1,000 NIRSA members serve as volunteer staff at the events (V. McCutchan, personal communication, July 1, 2014). Although professional development is discussed as a significant outcome of volunteering at Series events, there has been no published research demonstrating the actual learning of those volunteers. With the significant resources, human and fiscal, expended annually to host Series events, the

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specific benefit to NIRSA member institutions warrants examination. To understand the nature of professional development benefits that accrue by volunteering, it is important to review previous literature related to required job competencies and the skills needed to succeed for the campus recreation professional.

The *Recreational Sports Journal* (RSJ) contains numerous studies focusing on student learning (e.g., Danbert, Pivarnik, McNeil, & Washington, 2014; Hall, 2013) and student development (e.g., Simmons & Childers, 2013; Tingle, Cooney, Asbury, & Tate, 2013) in a variety of employment (e.g., aquatics) and participation settings (e.g., intramural sports). In the last 10 years, however, there have been only seven RSJ studies examining growth and professional development, or satisfaction among NIRSA professionals. Given the dearth of literature focusing on professional development in the RSJ, the research team explored other databases and uncovered two other studies that specifically explored campus recreational professionals.

In their 2007 study, Ross & Schurger, collected data from 168 recreational professionals to explore career path development. Their findings revealed that varied work experiences, involvement with important campus recreation organizations (e.g., NIRSA), networking, and passion are paramount to a long, successful career in campus recreation. In their study of 457 recreational sports professionals, Barcelona and Ross (2004) found that recreational sport administrators need a strong management foundation and to be highly competent in specific sport programming and recreational sport theories.

Using the Delphi method, Ball, Simpson, Ardivino, and Skemp-Arlt (2008) explored the leadership competencies of 10 campus recreation directors from Wisconsin. The study sought to identify common leadership traits. The study participants indicated commitment and integrity, communication skills, ability to manage a budget, personnel management, and adaptability to change were the traits campus recreation directors should possess. In another study exploring job competencies, Schneider, Steir Jr., Kampf, Haines, and Wilding (2006), collected data from 241 NIRSA professionals. Consistent with previous research, Schneider et al., found that campus recreation directors expected new hires to have excellent communication skills (oral and written) and have direct job-related experience in a variety of campus recreation settings. Other important research focused on the hiring practices of campus recreation directors at NIRSA institutions (Steir Jr., Schneider, Kampf, Wilding, & Haines, 2006). Two-hundred and forty-one campus recreation directors from across the U.S. responded to a 28-item survey and indicated a strong preference for candidates with advanced degrees, but no preference as to the academic discipline for those degrees. The findings also revealed the value of the NIRSA network in the job search process.

A third line of research in the RSJ has focused on job satisfaction. Using the Job Satisfaction Survey, Kaltenbaugh (2009) found that campus recreation professionals are more likely to have high levels of job satisfaction when they have high levels of autonomy on the job and when the culture of the workplace was positive and collegial. In their study of 269 NIRSA professionals, Schneider, Steir Jr., Kampf, Haines, and Wilding (2005) found campus recreation directors generally had high levels of intrinsic motivation and were more satisfied on the job when the following elements were present: job clarity, high levels of organizational performance, collaborative decision-making, strong relationships with coworkers, autonomy, and adequate job preparation (i.e., training). Building on the 2005 study, Steir Jr.,

Schneider, Kampf, and Gaskins, (2010) explored factors, which both increased and decreased job satisfaction. Receiving responses from 283 NIRSA professionals, Steir Jr. et al. (2010) found levels of job satisfaction varied according to length of time in the profession. Specifically, younger workers expressed higher levels of dissatisfaction, which highlights the importance of using a variety of motivational techniques and principles. Similarly, in their study of midlevel campus recreation program administrators, Zhang, DeMichele, and Connaughton (2004) indicated that organization factors, including organization structure, internal communication, political climate, professional development policies, and tenure were related to job satisfaction. While the previous research provides guidance and direction for campus recreation directors about understanding important job skills and competencies, there has been no specific exploration regarding the professional development benefits NIRSA professionals might acquire by volunteering at Series events. Moreover, no studies have specifically examined volunteerism and campus recreation professionals in any capacity. This gap in the literature highlights an area rife for exploration. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how NIRSA professionals perceive the value of volunteer experiences at Series events. In an attempt to respond to that problem, we addressed the following research question: How do campus recreation directors describe the benefits of volunteerism at Series events?

Methods

The current study is part of a larger project, which used a Sequential Exploratory mixed-method design. According to Creswell (2003), “the model is characterized by an initial phase of qualitative data collection and analysis, which is followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis” (p. 215). Creswell continued by asserting: “this model is especially advantageous when a researcher is building a new instrument” (p. 216). Based on the dearth of extant literature, the researchers for this study used in-depth interviews to collect experiences, histories, and perspectives from campus recreation directors seeking to explicate a more complete picture of professional development opportunities at Series events (Boyce & Neale, 2006; Edwards & Skinner, 2009). By allowing the voice of authorities to be heard, from the emic perspective, we gained a clearer understanding of the perceived value of volunteering at Series events.

Participants

Thirteen campus recreation directors from across the U.S. participated in the study. As the directors ultimately facilitate and approve the volunteer experiences, this population is the most appropriate to answer the research question. In addition, each participant had either: previously volunteered at, or permitted staff to volunteer at, or hosted a NIRSA Series event on their campus. First, this ensured that interviewees were well versed in the NIRSA Series events. Second, both of the researchers have extensive experience with the Series and have been NIRSA professionals for more than 20 years. The credibility and ability to *speak their language* helped to establish trust with study participants. The participants’ median years in the profession was 28 years ($SD = 7.4$) with a range of 16–39 years of campus recreation experience (see Table 1 for demographic information).

Table 1 Pseudonyms and Demographic Information of Study Participants

Pseudonym	NIRSA region	Years in the profession	Gender	Experience with Series events*
Jerry	I	35	M	1, 3
John	I	20	M	1, 2, 3
TJ	I	31	M	1, 3
Khalid	II	16	M	1, 3
Bruce	II	22	M	1, 2, 3
Jack	III	30	M	1, 2, 3
Murph	III	37	M	1, 2, 3
Barb	IV	19	F	1, 3
Frank	IV	27	M	1, 2, 3
Pete	V	39	M	1, 3
Bob	V	28	M	1, 2, 3
Tom	VI	34	M	1, 3
Carlos	VI	22	M	1, 2, 3

* 1 = Has hosted a Series event; 2 = Has volunteered at a Series event, not hosted by their campus; 3 = Permits staff at his/her campus to volunteer.

Procedure

After obtaining approval from the principal investigator's Institutional Review Board (IRB), participants were recruited using purposive sampling with the assistance of the NIRSA Headquarters, based on the following criteria: 1) they had the title of Associate Director or Director of Campus Recreation; and 2) their institution had hosted a regional or national Series event; or 3) they had direct reports who attended a Series event as a volunteer staff member. The NIRSA Headquarters provided a list of four campus recreation professionals from each of the six NIRSA regions who met the stated criteria. From that list, the researchers randomly selected two campus recreation professionals from each NIRSA region. Those who were selected received a solicitation e-mail inviting them to participate in the study. All the directors who were selected to participate accepted the invitation. One of the invitees was on vacation when the initial emails were sent, which led the research team to invite a third director in Region I. As such, Region I has three participants while the other five NIRSA regions have two each. All participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire and signed a consent form. The primary investigators conducted phone interviews at a convenient time for the participants. The primary investigators conducted and audio recorded all interviews, each of which lasted approximately one hour.

Instrument

A semistructured interview guide based on the previous literature in campus recreation hiring practices (cf., Steir Jr. et al., 2006), preferred job competencies (cf.,

Ball et al., 2008; Schneider et al., 2006), and successful career path factors (Ross & Schurger, 2007) was developed. The basic elements of the literature were used to develop the interview guide. As the previous literature provided a strong foundation to understand how professional development and professionalism have been explored in the collegiate recreation field, the studies examined in the literature review proved to be invaluable in developing the interview protocol. Further, a panel of five experts in campus recreation management reviewed the interview guide for content validity. The semistructured approach allowed the researchers to start with a broad question from the interview guide and then follow the conversation (Munhall, 2007). Sample guiding questions include: “How did you get involved in campus recreation?”; “Tell me about your career path?”; “How do you describe professional development?”; and “When hiring a staff member what are the most important characteristics you look for?” See the Appendix for the full interview guide.

Analysis

Concerns about subjectivity and bias are always present based on the nature of the interview process. Nonetheless, the value of the approach was not diminished and the research team made every effort to avoid collecting and analyzing data using any a priori assumptions (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997). After the interviews were conducted, they were professionally transcribed verbatim. A total of 205 pages were transcribed. At that time, all participants had the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. According to Edwards and Skinner (2009), such member checks are a valuable method to enhance credibility and trustworthiness of the data. After the member checks, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym to protect their identity. The research team independently coded the data line by line. The first step in the process revealed 60 initial codes. As a final step, the researchers compared their findings until they agreed on emergent themes that best capture the perceptions of the campus recreation administrators (Creswell, 2003). In addition, willing participants completed post hoc member checks of the emergent themes to provide further credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the results (Munhall, 2007). At neither stage did the member checks result in any edits to the interview transcripts.

Results

In discussing their experiences, participants described how they became involved in the recreation profession, various positions they held throughout their career, their philosophy of professional development, characteristics and competencies they look for in employees, as well as various considerations regarding their respective institutional involvement with Series events. Of the initial 60 codes, nine subthemes emerged and were then organized under the following overarching themes: *personal experience*, *professional development*, and *ideal job characteristics*. The themes and subthemes are illustrated in Table 2. A detailed discussion of each theme follows.

Personal Experience

Participants in the study recalled how they became interested in campus recreation, describing their initial job while an undergraduate student and their career path that

Table 2 Emergent Themes

Theme identified	Subthemes
Personal experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifelong learner • Mentors • Networking
Professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Teamwork • Communication • Training
Ideal job characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude • Organizational Citizenship Behavior

led them to the current role. Many of the factors that led to their continuation in the profession included their experiences as a student (undergraduate and graduate), and later, as a recreation professional. Specifically, the sense of being a *Lifelong Learner*, the tremendous impact of *Mentors*, and the vast *Networking* opportunities within the recreation profession were critical elements that helped shape the participants' attitudes and philosophies. Greater description of these factors and participant quotes follow.

Lifelong Learner. Campus recreation is a unique profession, which provides numerous opportunities for those in it to have the ability to learn new skills throughout one's career. All 13 participants expressed this subtheme. A quote from Frank summarized, "I've always believed that you never stop learning. You've got to continue on no matter what area you're in. . . . I still continue to learn right now." Pete noted, "You want to deliver the very best for the clientele that we're serving, whether that be students, faculty or staff. It means that you have a desire to continue to learn. . . . I'm a firm believer that you're a lifelong learner."

In addition to the general concept of lifelong learning, participants expressed specific learning opportunities that appear to be consistent for those engaged in Series events. Pete describes, "I mean, you have to arrange for all the field space, and maybe you're working with hotels, and could be working with restaurants and all of that. I think it's extremely important. Again, that gets back to what I would call management skills. Could be time management skills, communication skills, delegation, organization, all of those come into play." Further describing the relationship between lifelong learning and Series events was Tom, who said:

If you go inside out and you look at the value of the time that was put into the planning, and look at the experience the people got upon arrival, and look at being able to critique and evaluate officials, and look at the organization and administration skills that the staff had to be involved in. Look at a volunteer that got exposed to something they've never been exposed to; I use the word highly successful.

Mentors. In all 13 interviews, the participants either recognized a specific individual they consider a mentor or detailed how mentoring is a deliberate part

of their work culture. The results strongly suggest mentoring could be one of the most influential aspects of the campus recreation profession. As Bruce claimed, “I was a student leader in that program so I have really received a lot of nurturing and support. They build you up and build your confidence. The people, the staff in general—more of one-on-one mentoring.” Carlos also praised the role of one of his mentors, “He showed us his personal side. That was really valuable to know that these people of influence and power care and demonstrate that. That stayed with me.”

It is clear from the participants how the mentoring culture perpetuates itself within the campus recreation profession. It “started with someone that really had a passion for the profession, and that got passed on, and then people followed in their footsteps, and then carried on more” (Bob). Barb crystalizes this point:

They [mentor] knew that whenever they were a young professional, somebody mentored them or maybe served in an advisory role. They remember that exposure and so 20 years later, they’re trying to pay it forward or pay it back and mentor or advise those young professionals.

To further elaborate on the role of mentoring in this profession, Murph said his mentor “was so good at managing the staff and the operations. I obviously looked at that and tried to model some of the things I did after that.”

Mentoring techniques vary from individual to individual; however, there appeared to be a constant theme among the participants that heightened its impact. As John suggested, “We visit each other. I have been to visit and he’s been up here with my kids and spent the weekend. We are lifelong friends now.” Creating and nurturing the professional and personal relationships have been important components for the success of the mentorship. Per Carlos:

His family was open to mine, and we were open to theirs. That sort of relationship developed and every time I see him now we talk about how the families are doing and such. The relationship was as important as anything to me.

Networking. Among the many professional and career-based opportunities afforded from being a member of the NIRSA, its value lies in the ability and willingness of its members to network with each other. The NIRSA network has created an overlapping grid of relationships across the profession. This statement from Tom exemplifies the basics of networking in the campus recreation profession: “I was just able to meet people, they tell me stories and I tell them stories.”

While *Networking* may be related to mentoring, NIRSA members network with more than just their mentor or mentee. It can indeed be considered the lifeblood of the association. To that point, Jack stated, “I think the most valuable piece within our profession that could never be measured . . . is the networking. We learn more from one another than we ever learned from sitting in a workshop.” Specific to learning, Carlos said, “Watching other professionals and how they approached the profession was a good learning [experience]. Those can be directly applied to how I do my job right now.”

Learning is a validated byproduct of networking; however, the participants expressed additional outcomes associated with networking. The campus recreation profession is social in nature, so according to Bob the ability to “meet people, meet

peers, develop lifelong friendships” is important. *Networking* can also be used as a critical assessment tool for Series events, as Bob further suggested, “The event happens, and then afterwards, more conversations occur after the event. It really develops the whole idea of networking, and being able to do an evaluation of how you ran the program, and what people thought of it.” When positions open, *Networking* can be viewed as an integral part of the search process. Although experience, traits, skills, and fit will ultimately decide who secures the job, there is a sense of increased interest when the candidate is known. As Barb personally described, “I think I was exposed to people that were at that tournament. When they saw my name, when I applied for a position and they saw my name, they were ‘Oh wait. I recognize this name. Oh yeah, you know what? Let’s bring her on to campus.’” From the employer perspective, John explained, “I just had two [candidates], and I knew both of them. I’ve watched them work our flag football tournament for three or four years. I’ve watched one of them work as a basketball tournament referee, and there’s no substitute for that because now you go back to saying yeah, you’ve always been on an interview, you didn’t even know it.”

The *Personal Experience* subtheme details the development and the growth of our participants’ specific personal and professional relationships and the contribution of NIRSA Series events to said development. The concept explains how study participants became interested in the campus recreation profession as well as what has kept them involved and engaged. The theme of *Personal Experience* for participants is created by the sense of being a Lifelong Learner, the deliberate connection of Mentors, and the strong Networking environment of the campus recreation profession. While each category shaped different experiences, it was clear that interaction between categories, such as learning and networking, shaped attitudes and philosophies of participants in similar ways.

Professional Development

Like many professional associations, NIRSA excels at creating and providing outstanding professional development opportunities to its members. When discussing *Professional Development*, participants provided a multitude of ideas that spoke to how they defined it, how their vice president/dean would define it, and the expectations they have when supporting a staff member to attend a particular event, specifically a Series event. Study participants all indicated that they considered significant professional development occurs at Series events. TJ claims, “I think that you’re going to learn different things over time and you’re going to get better. You’re going to be able to go back to your institution and you’re going to be better there, too.” Jack shares this belief:

In the end, I hope that our people see some things that they had not seen before in our program. They take some best practices, whether it’s tournament management or whether it’s officiating techniques, or whatever those things might be, and they will bring those things back to our program.

Furthermore, the subthemes of *Teamwork*, *Leadership*, *Communication*, and *Training* emerged as the most significant areas of professional development resulting through volunteering at Series events. Interestingly, a pattern emerged within *Professional Development*, which we identified as *Professional Development* phases.

Specifically, according to study participants it appeared as if there are three phases of *Professional Development* through which campus recreation professionals transition in their career. Bob described the initial phase, “I think when you’re younger in the first year, [it’s] taking a grasp at all the opportunities of gathering information and meeting people to develop the various theories and applications, how to do things and how to run things.” After a certain amount of time, a professional will move into the next phase of *Professional Development*. As Tom claimed, “I think as one’s career matures, you allow to raise yourself . . . and really see the deep values of why this is important.” According to John, the final phase of *Professional Development*, involves “serv[ing] on panels [and offering] professional leadership and mentorship and still give back to (the) profession.” While each phase of *Professional Development* occurs at different points of a career, the participants describe how each subtheme impacts the journey.

Teamwork. In higher education, it is rare that an employee works in a vacuum. Success typically arrives to those who effectively collaborate with others. All the participants shared the importance of *Teamwork*. As Murph stated, “If you get somebody that doesn’t work well with others, that isn’t able to compromise . . . or isn’t capable of collaboration—it can blow up your department. That sounds crazy, but it just becomes so critical.” Stating his support succinctly, Bob affirmed, “We’re in an atmosphere that really pushes collaboration.” From an employer perspective, Jerry discussed how he values teamwork when he said, “We all look for somebody who puts the larger organization, whether it’s the university, the department, or in our case division of student affairs, above their personal responsibilities.”

Many participants reported how volunteers engaged in Series events learn the importance of *Teamwork* and acquire a working knowledge of it. TJ highlighted this point:

The event management team is also a team. These people are brought together from different places; they have to come together as a team, and they have to perform too. I think that they’re being exposed to people who are adept at that; you’re going to get that at the championship series level. You’re going to be exposed to the people who have years of experience in this. You’re going to be exposed to people who’ve had an opportunity to do this several times and are now teaching that.

The link between *Teamwork* and Series events is not only exhibited by volunteers from other institutions, but also within the host school. Pete shared his thoughts on this idea:

It’s an opportunity for professional development for our own staff; it allows the staff to work together on an event where they wouldn’t necessarily work together on a day-to-day basis. It might be our facilities staff working with our intramural sports staff and our sport club staff, and our athletic trainers and our marketing and our development all coming together to help work an event. I think there’s value to that too.

It was evident from the results that *Teamwork* is an essential component to those in the campus recreation profession. Moreover, Series events appear to provide a viable outlet for volunteers and host sites to realize the significance to one’s

professional development and the mechanism to increase a working knowledge of *Teamwork*.

Leadership. *Leadership* was identified as another critical subtheme of *Professional Development*. While *Leadership* has myriad definitions, TJ's definition was representative of the study participants. He described that leadership has:

that ability to inspire others . . . to have the confidence in yourself and in that team that you can inspire them, and you can facilitate that group to achieve at a level that they couldn't do individually. It's developing that synergy.

The participants are all in a position of leadership, so their role within the field of campus recreation lends itself to supporting the importance and impact of *Leadership*. Although their methods may vary, they remained consistent in terms of applying those methods to their respective staffs. Jack described how he uses leadership in an effort to benefit his entire staff:

Those individuals came back and presented various workshops to our staff, and now are going to be presenting various information to our student team at our training for our students this fall. That's where you know your ROI [return on investment] is measured there.

Furthering the idea of investing in their staff, Tom affirmed, "That's why we host events revenue neutral, and our financial gain is the investment in ourselves." Another facet of *Leadership* from our participants' perspective centers on how to inspire staff. Jerry exemplified what other participants believed, "From my point of view, it's allowing people to get engaged in something they really enjoy and are enthusiastic about, and that carries over into the rest of their job."

The participants' application of *Leadership* was equal to their expectation that their staff engage in activities that provided leadership development opportunities. Again, methods to developing one's leadership skills are varied, which may or may not involve the Series, however, the standard to develop leadership skills remains constant. TJ reiterated the notion:

Our expectation would be that your involvement . . . whether it's personnel management or operational management, looking at leadership skill development, developing teaching skills—those may be all roles or touch points that we have opportunities to learn or grow through the championship series.

Carlos reinforced this opinion, "Even if it's around leadership and it's not around sports programming or if it's around some other element of what we do in our profession. . . . I think we have to make the most of the opportunities."

It is evident the participants place a high value on *Leadership* and providing leadership development opportunities for their staffs, which speaks to their confidence in Series events. Many participants described how Series events are "a great opportunity . . . to take on leadership roles" (Pete). Tom summarized the support for and the impact of the Series: "My term is the new competencies and it's these value-based lenses. Again, the tournament model and the sports model is a beautiful medium. We've completely changed our internship program and our leadership development series based on these value categories."

Communication. *Communication* was identified as another emerging subtheme associated with *Professional Development* within Series events. Twelve study participants described *Communication* as an important component of *Professional Development*. The obvious forms of *Communication* were deemed as “a critical element in our organization” (Carlos); however, there were other *Communication* methods the participants believed to be part of the learning, which occurs at Series events. As Bruce claimed, “You’re not going there just to learn the rules. No, you sit in—how was the agenda organized, how many people talk, what’s the delivery method?” Carlos believed “group facilitation, listening skills, and public speaking” are additional *Communication* methods gained through volunteering at Series events.

When describing the development of *Communication* skills one of his staff members acquired at a successful Series event, Khalid stated:

He had to be an outstanding communicator. He had to follow through. He had to delegate. He had to lead. He had to inspire. He had to sell. He had to roll up his sleeves and just do. He had to put out fires and conflict resolution. You need to think about creating work teams, and putting people together that can work together, and giving them the vision, and letting them go run with it, and checking in, and empowering, but yet, ensuring that quality is met. Dealing with the NIRSA National [Headquarters] and trying to make sure that they are connected and tied in through communication, and expectations are being met on both ends

Training. While *teamwork*, *leadership*, and *communication* were all identified as significant professional development outcomes, *Training* was recognized as the critical piece associated with Series events. All 13 participants identified improved *Training* ability as the most recognizable expected outcome they have for their staff when volunteering at Series events. For example, Carlos stated, “Much of what I learned about official’s development came from tournaments. Much of what the people that I send to tournaments learned about official’s development is from those tournaments.”

A consistent idea from many of the participants was that Series events are analogous to other educational opportunities offered by the NIRSA. While the methodology may be slightly different, the outcomes are comparable. Jack clarified, “I see it very similar to going to a conference or symposium or a workshop.” Much like all other workshops or conferences attended by NIRSA members, the expectation for Series volunteers is to apply this new knowledge on their respective campuses. Khalid supported this: “I hope that they go out and they see different training techniques that will allow them to come back to my campus and make our officials’ development better.” Bob confirmed, “The overall benefit, to me, is that the experiences that people go through, they can bring it back to your campus, and they can bring it back to your program.”

Like many professional associations, *Professional Development* is an integral part of the NIRSA fabric. The NIRSA has had a documented history of effective *Professional Development* opportunities through their workshops, conferences, and symposiums. The onset and growth of the Series has provided another outlet for *Professional Development* within the NIRSA, and through this study the subthemes

of *Leadership, Teamwork, Communication, and Training*, have been documented benefits of its existence.

Ideal Job Characteristics

Participants in this study were asked to describe ideal characteristics they seek when interviewing candidates for open positions. These included all professional positions under their purview. Although the results yielded 12 unique characteristics, two distinct subthemes emerged: *Attitude* and *Organizational Citizenship Behavior*. Greater description of these subthemes and representative quotes follow.

Attitude. In terms of Ideal Job Characteristics, *Attitude* captured a range of the participants' beliefs about what they look for in candidates. With the understanding that *Attitude* typically drives a person's behavior, it is seemingly a fundamental factor for success in the profession of campus recreation. As Pete claimed, "For me it means you're excited about what you're doing, coming to work every day with a positive attitude." Staying with the notion of a positive *Attitude*, our participants associated a positive *Attitude* with the ability to get along with others. For example, John stated, "The first thing I look for is someone who can be collaborative and someone who is nice and who can get along with people. You are dead in the water if you can't do that."

Attitude encompasses a wide range of specific constructs with each standing on their own toward impacting a candidate's skill set. Carlos was specific when he said he values "the fearlessness . . . willing to take risks, try new things" from candidates. Supporting this belief Pete stated, "We want people that want to achieve; that want to be on the leading edge. They want to take – or don't mind taking risks when it's appropriate."

The idea of a risk taker is not the only stand-alone with positive *Attitude* characteristics. The participants believed having and demonstrating a passion toward their profession as important. Bruce claimed, "You try to look for . . . somebody that is responsible, that comes across in their responsible, put-together way, and has some energy and passion for their chosen area." Further describing this idea is TJ who said he looks for "folks that really have that passion for this career, for this field, for this industry." Pete advanced the importance of passion, "I think the number one consideration is passion for what they're going to be doing."

The participants were consistent with the belief that initiative is also another critical component of demonstrating a positive *Attitude*. While Khalid looked for that candidate with a "positive attitude and initiative," it was Tom who elevated the importance of initiative: "I think that [initiative] is the ultimate competency of our skill set, and it's the ultimate value of our role on a campus."

Having passion toward one's career, being a risk taker, and showing initiative are three consistent characteristics of a positive *Attitude* the participants' value; however, additional characteristics were prominent as well. Murph valued "people that are willing to challenge things . . . [and] people who are willing to debate things." Another facet of attitude is finding "different ways to be more efficient and effective to serve students on your campus" (Khalid). This idea of innovation is supported by Carlos, who claimed, "I think there needs to be innovation in what we do. I think we need to reward innovation," and TJ, who said, "I look for someone who has developed something new or turned something old into something new."

A positive attitude is a dynamic concept, with multiple layers and beliefs about what it actually is. The participants painted the picture of what is valued in the profession of campus recreation. Khalid summarized in sufficient form, “The initiative, being a critical thinker . . . being flexible, and being supportive of each other, and understanding that you’re part of a bigger picture of what we’re trying to do. Those are what I look [for].”

Organizational Citizenship Behaviors. Although NIRSA institutional members may have similar missions on their respective campus, it is very likely they each have unique expectations on the importance of *Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCBs)*. Positive *OCBs*, an element of strong workplace culture, impacts how progress is made and the overall organizational effectiveness. All thirteen participants referenced many factors related to *OCB* while discussing ideal job characteristics.

The type of position will dictate the technical skills needed for the job, but after utilizing this filter, the true measure of a candidate will be determined by his or her fit within the organization. Bruce stated:

Are you going to fit into this environment? Not every single person’s going to fit into our environment. They may be able to do the job, but they may be just so far to the right or left of our equilibrium their true skills won’t come through.

Further evidence was provided by, Barb who said, “We all know that you can look great on paper, but whenever they come to campus, you just know they won’t click with the rest of the staff.”

All the participants supported *OCB* as a tool they use based on their specific organization as well as their experience in a leadership role; however, there were other notions of *OCB* that transcended any one organization. Jerry stated that a consistent, positive behavior is exemplified when “somebody . . . can get along with the staff,” while John searched for someone who “can work with the difficult people on your campus.” With the understanding of how the campus recreation profession operates, Tom clarified, “It’s really about the soft skills in today’s day and age; the people skills and your ability to work as a team.”

Another element of *OCBs* that emerged from the data were that employees needed to understand the importance of and have the ability to know their impact on a larger scale. Murph claimed, “We’re looking for people that can see the big picture.” Khalid agreed, “You can’t live in silos. You’ve got to be all on the same page.” One’s ability to broaden her view can be linked to her capacity to work toward a common goal. As Tom valued, “that ability to not be an ‘I’ person, but be an ‘Our’ person.” Jerry, who expected employees to “make a decision that’s going to be in the best interest of the department,” reinforced this belief.

Participants’ representations of Ideal Job Characteristics provide a snapshot of their priorities when they are recruiting new employees. It is a lens they look through in determining whether a candidate has the skills they deem important for their organization. To that end, study participants strongly suggest a relationship between Series events and skill development. Frank provided an exemplar:

Here’s an individual that was very quiet, wasn’t outspoken, didn’t speak up a lot. Now due to him getting involved with the other regionals, doing some

things that he's doing with NIRSA and Regional Championships, he is very outspoken now, he's very confident in what he's doing. He knows he has a great network that he can bounce things off of. I think that makes him a better person.

Murph described the development of ideal job characteristics this way:

They learn how to communicate and interact with—when you do an event like this, you bring in people from all over the country that don't do things exactly the same way you're used to. Being able to connect with that group, and work through the things it takes to help; that group quickly becomes a team.

Similarly, Jerry stated: "If you're organizing a Regional tournament . . . It's a growth experience. It's a developmental experience to be able to go to or participate in working one of those, or organizing one of those." Perhaps Frank made the most direct link between professional development and ideal job characteristics:

There's so many things in the competencies that they can do that they build from. The communication, the listening, the training, being a little more outgoing and all this kind of stuff because you have to be, you have to talk to everybody.

Discussion

Volunteers are the lifeblood of Series events, yet it is paramount to ensure those professional staff members are growing and developing in ways that will benefit them, their organizations, and NIRSA as a whole. The results of this study indicate that recreational sports directors do perceive significant benefits can be realized by volunteering at Series events. Our findings revealed connections to previous studies focused on intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction (Steir Jr. et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2004). The participants appear to confirm the perception that skills acquired through volunteering at Series events would enhance motivation and employee satisfaction. This is especially true for those with a positive attitude, who engage in organizational citizenship behaviors.

Our study participants also indicated that Series events can serve as a site for job training and provide opportunities for volunteers to improve communication skills, both of which are similar to the finding of Schneider and colleagues (2006). In addition, the results support the findings of Ball et al. (2008), Barcelona and Ross (2004), and Steir Jr. et al. (2006). According to the perceptions of our participants, NIRSA professionals who volunteer at Series events can improve communication skills, adaptability, budget skills, and personnel management. Ball et al. and Barcelona and Ross indicated those were important traits for campus recreation directors to possess and Schneider et al. found those to be traits campus recreation directors look for when hiring new staff.

The results of this study also seem to confirm previous studies, which explored the volunteer experience in a sport setting (cf. Warner, Newland, & Green, 2011). Furthermore, management philosophies of the directors who participated in the study are in line with Kroth and Young's (2014) findings. Specifically, that supervisors need to provide both opportunities for social interaction and educational opportunities to help young professionals grow and develop. Indeed, by encouraging

and allowing their young professional staff members to volunteer at Series events, the study participants are simultaneously developing the organizational capacity of NIRSA, while meeting the needs and expectations of millennial generation staff members.

The results of this study further demonstrate that the participants had a vested interest in the success of their staff members. They identified three broad themes, which describe the benefits of volunteerism through the Series: *Personal Experience (Lifelong Learner, Mentors, Networking)*, *Professional Development (Teamwork, Leadership, Communication, Training)*, and *Ideal Job Characteristics (Attitude, Organizational Citizenship Behaviors)*. While participants shared experiences and traits that shaped their own careers, they perceived there to be significant opportunities for *Personal Experience*, *Professional Development*, and gaining *Ideal Job Characteristics* for their staff members while volunteering at Series events.

Although volunteering can look great on paper, study participants put into words the value Series events can actually provide, to not only a NIRSA professional, but also to hiring institutions. Series events provide opportunities for recreation professionals to create their own personal experiences by learning from and developing relationships with peers and future mentors within the NIRSA network. Through participation in Series events one can also learn the importance of a positive attitude and the professional benefits of engaging in *OCBs*. According to our study participants, those with the best attitudes and demonstrated *OCBs* are more likely to achieve the professional development benefits and take full advantage of mentoring and networking opportunities, not only at Series events, but also after the events are over. While the importance of personal, professional and job-related skill development permeated the study, participants also offered specific suggestions for improving learning opportunities and perceived benefits of volunteering at Series events.

Practical Implications

This research has implications for articulating the benefits of volunteering at Series events. It is clear from this study that for all of the directors, both *Personal Experiences* and *Professional Development* were significant components of their occupational journey. By more strategically highlighting the benefits of volunteering at events to other NIRSA professionals and institutions, it is possible to have more success in the recruitment of volunteers and host sites.

Based on the findings of this study, it would also be beneficial to better incorporate the three broad themes identified by participants into the NIRSA Championship Series brand. By emphasizing the importance of *Personal Experiences*, *Professional Development*, and *Ideal Job Characteristics* as benefits of volunteering at Series events, NIRSA could enhance the visibility and usage of core competencies by NIRSA professional members and institutions. Utilization of these themes in developing more consistent training and skill-development opportunities at Series events would also aid in maintaining vibrant extramural opportunities to help NIRSA institutions better serve their student populations.

Research Implications

This research demonstrated the benefit of exploring the value of volunteerism at Series events. We now have a more inclusive picture of how directors view the

volunteer experience. Rarely do we have the opportunity to seek the views and opinions of those who make the decisions about staff professional development. Yet these individuals are likely to offer the most relevant information regarding why they choose to approve certain opportunities for their staff.

There are limitations, which must be highlighted. The sample, while consisting of experts and long-tenured directors, was selected using purposeful methods. Given the strict selection criteria, it is possible these directors are predisposed to have positive perceptions of Series events. Future research could explore the perceptions of recreation directors who do not support their staff's engagement with or volunteerism at Series events. In addition, given the criteria we sent to the NIRSA National Headquarters, our study only included one female director. While it was unintentional on part of the research team, it certainly presents a possible gender bias, which should be considered when interpreting the results. Lastly, as with all qualitative research, the limited participant pool and diversity of perspectives limit the generalizability of the results.

Despite the limitations, this study represents an important first step toward an understanding of professional development and growth that occurs at Series events. Exploring the personal experience of current NIRSA directors allowed us to identify important possible outcomes of volunteering at extramural tournaments. Further research is required to understand whether these positive outcomes are actually realized. A good foundation upon which to construct future research is the volunteer management literature. Previous studies focus on the unique nature of volunteering in a sport context (Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Warner, Newland, & Green, 2011; Welty Peachey, Bruening, Lyras, Cohen, & Cunningham, 2015) and others contend there are differences between the experiences of those who volunteer sporadically when compared with those who have a more continuous relationship with an agency (Fairley, Kellett, & Green, 2007). This study highlights the idea that exploring professional development opportunities through the lenses of volunteer management scholarship could be an important next step. Future studies should explore the development of identifiable skills and competencies that could be correlated with volunteering at Series events.

Specifically, the authors recommend exploring professional development experienced by Series volunteers using a pretest / posttest design. This method, grounded in Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome (I-E-O) Model would allow for the exploration of the environmental impact to the volunteer experience, while controlling for any preexisting competencies. In addition, the use of this model ensures we avoid the "fatal flaws associated with an outcomes only model" (Astin, 2014).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of how NIRSA directors perceive the value of volunteer experiences at NIRSA Championship Series events. The study extends the literature on volunteerism by specifically looking at one association's opportunities for growth and professional development of its members. While the study answered the research question, the researchers found that the Series could be more intentional in promoting the experience gained by volunteers. Directors' answers and reflections of their *Personal Experiences at*

Series events and *Professional Development* gained from volunteering themselves indicates a strong connection that could be capitalized upon. Further, by taking a more intentional *Professional Development* approach, including exposure to training in *Ideal Job Characteristics* of campus recreation professionals in volunteer opportunities, Series leadership can implement better policies, procedures, and structures that impact the volunteer experiences of NIRSA members. Finally, it is clear from this research that NIRSA professionals highly value volunteer experiences at Series events, and Series leadership should continue to assess each event to ensure that consistency in messaging and experience is retained throughout events.

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Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. What would you estimate your department spends annually on NCS events?
 - a. Please consider direct expenses, such as, but not limited to travel (hotel, meals, transportation) and entry fees.
 - b. In addition, please provide an estimated number of hours you and/or your staff volunteer annually toward NCS events.
2. How did you get involved in campus recreation?
 - a. Tell me about your career path?
 - b. Why have you decided to stay in this profession?
3. How do you describe professional development?
 - a. How does your supervisor describe professional development?
4. How do you describe professional development for members of your staff (please consider both full-time and graduate students)?

5. When hiring a staff member what are the most important characteristics you look for?
6. Why has your institution been actively engaged in some capacity in NCS events?
 - a. Why have you afforded members of your staff opportunities to be active participants at NCS events that you're hosting? [ask only if applicable]
7. What specific skills or competencies do you expect your professional staff members to develop, enhance, or refine by volunteering at NCS events?
 - a. In what ways do you perceive that NCS events provide opportunities for your staff to develop those competencies or skills?
8. From your perspective, is there anything NIRSA can do to enhance the development of those professional skills and competencies at NCS events? If so, what?
9. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the topic of professional development at NCS events that we haven't discussed thus far?

Probes:

Tell me more about that.

Can you give me an example?

I am not sure I understand what you mean.

Can you elaborate on that idea?

Can you define that or tell me what that means to you?

Is there anything else?