

Acquiring Valuable Consulting Experiences as Graduate Students: Insights of Two Young Professionals

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Abstract

One of the world's largest sport psychology association, the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology (AAASP), advocates student attendance and participation at its annual conference for continued personal growth and career development. Yet, it is surprising that so few articles in our journals have focused on different areas pertaining to the career development of sport psychology graduate students. It is probably fair to say that currently, students in our field acquire most of their information through their courses, by reading and exchanging ideas with peers and professionals, and by attending conferences. While there have been a few publications outlining potential academic training and career options offered by different graduate programs, there does not appear to be any information on ways to acquire applied consulting experiences as graduate students. This article will attempt to shed some light on this topic and encourage readers to reflect upon their own experiences to help young professionals gain some valuable applied work in the early stages of their career. Based on the literature and our own personal experiences, we will present information on the development of knowledge and skills for high quality consulting, gaining entry and trust, and building effective relationships with athletes and coaches.

Introduction

The importance of acquiring applied consulting experiences early in one's career has been echoed over the years by both professionals and graduate students. Many students enter the field of sport psychology with the desire to do some applied work with athletes and/or coaches as early as possible in their program. Oftentimes, it is what motivates them to develop skills in this domain because they are eager to apply what they learn from theory. We can both certainly attest to this.

While most young academics receive ample amounts of theoretical and practical training concerning the proper ways of conducting research and teaching, many have been disappointed in the actual applied, "on the field" training they have received. It is noteworthy that this issue has been raised during several workshops, student meetings, and discussions at previous AAASP conferences. This issue was also discussed at length in a recent article by Silva, Conroy and Zizzi (1999). They stated that applied

training and supervised applied experiences are lacking in contemporary sport psychology graduate programs, and this could affect the credibility and future advancement of this field. In their conclusion, Silva et al. said that “students and young professionals, the future of the field, must also assume a more proactive role in the advancement of the field and thus facilitate the emergence of sport psychology as a worthy and notable discipline and profession in the 21st century.” (p.317).

One way to do this is for students and young professionals to openly share their views and experiences as graduate students. As a result of a workshop we conducted with students at the AAASP conference in San Diego (Durand-Bush, Bloom, & Schinke, 1997), and the positive feedback we subsequently received, we decided to write a paper to address some issues that were raised regarding the acquisition of applied consulting experiences as graduate students. It is hoped that this article will shed some light and generate more discussion on this topic so that students will be able to adequately prepare themselves to meet real life challenges when they begin their professional careers.

An important step in acquiring applied sport psychology training lies in the choice of an appropriate graduate program and supervisor. Fortunately, some researchers have examined these areas to provide useful guidelines (see Andersen, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 1994; Andersen, Williams, Aldridge, & Taylor, 1997; Waite & Pettit, 1993). Waite and Pettit surveyed recently graduated sport psychology doctoral students to investigate their background, training and work experiences, and perceptions of their current profession. They reported that 56% of the participants spent time consulting with both athlete and non-

athlete populations. Of interest is that despite this, some of them stated that they were displeased with the lack of formal and structured training they received as students to develop knowledge and skills regarding the delivery of appropriate services. Waite and Pettit suggested that “these comments and findings provide a strong message that a more sound formal preparation for applied work is needed, e.g., practicums, lab courses where technical skills are practiced and supervised, internships, etc.” (pp. 247-248).

Andersen and colleagues (1997) expanded the work of Waite and Pettit (1993) by including a larger sample of recent graduates, including those from both doctoral and master’s level programs. Their research revealed that teaching and research positions were the main source of income and employment for the recent graduates. With respect to finding full-time income-generating applied sport psychology work, the outlook was unfortunately not very positive. Andersen and colleagues found that only a few of recent graduates in sport psychology with a doctoral degree were earning “substantial income” from their consulting work. Also, master’s level graduates reported not having enough training or applied work experience to get work in this area. What is interesting is that it was also found that 21% of the participants had no practicum experience working with athletes, and 50% had 100 hours or less of contact with athletes. Although it appears that many young professionals in this field want more applied sport psychology work, their lack of experience and structured training as graduate students may be the most important factor hindering them from reaching their goals.

What can be done about this? There is no doubt that students must have access to

credible, “applied” sport psychology training programs that offer supervised practica and structured internships (see Silva et al., 1999). They must also have access to competent thesis and internship supervisors who play a crucial role in the development of graduate students. In many cases, students consider them to be mentors and rely on them to develop skills and acquire sufficient applied experience to be able to subsequently obtain employment. Thus, thesis and internship supervisors must be willing to not only invest a considerable amount of time in the supervisory process, but also share extensive information that will prepare students for work after they graduate. We are reminded of a motivating phrase that our supervisor frequently repeated to us: “Great mentors are those who encourage and provide an appropriate training environment for their students to surpass them.”

In another study, Andersen, Van Raalte, and Brewer (1994) assessed the supervisory skills of sport psychology supervisors associated with graduate programs that offered applied sport psychology practica and/or internships. They also asked students to rate their supervisors on these same skills. Although most supervisees reported they were pleased with their supervisors, it was difficult to determine whether or not they were satisfied with the specific amount and type of feedback they received about their strengths and weaknesses as consultants and their ability to implement different psychological interventions. This suggests that more research needs to be conducted to examine, and most importantly, enhance the supervisory and graduate training process.

The questions “Who makes a good supervisor?” and “What are the best methods for acquiring applied consulting experiences?” have led us to compile additional information based on our own

graduate training and interactions with students and professionals in the field. Following are some lessons and recommendations that have helped us generate potential answers to these very significant questions. It is our hope that they stimulate more discussion for the future.

Acquiring Knowledge / Skills

There are several issues surrounding the possibilities of consulting as a graduate student and it is important to do some homework ahead of time, before even enrolling in a program of study. What are logical steps? First, it is a wise choice to invest time and effort into “shopping” for a suitable program. People invest valuable time into buying a car or a house and searching for a graduate program should be done in a similar fashion. You should not be afraid to scrutinize information and to ask questions. After all, your graduate experience may or may not open many doors for you in the future.

Fortunately, we have access to valuable resources to help us in this process, one of which is the “The Directory of Graduate Programs in Applied Sport Psychology.” Sachs, Burke, and Gomer (1998) developed this extensive resource for aspiring students and professionals in the field of sport psychology. According to these authors, their directory “is intended to provide a starting point for students searching for a graduate program, as well as serve as a reference work for others in the field” (p. 1). This valuable aid should be consulted by all individuals seeking a career in sport psychology.

Note that in browsing this guide, it is important to pay attention to the orientation of the programs, the number of professors with whom you could work, their area of expertise, the opportunities for supervised

internships and funding, and anything else you feel is relevant. Once you have targeted a few programs, we encourage you to contact the professors with whom you would be interested to work, even though this might seem intimidating at first. Our personal experience and those of others indicate that most professors are very receptive and helpful when students ask for information. In fact, many professionals in the field are eager to guide students in their quest to find an appropriate program, therefore you should take advantage of this opportunity.

In selecting our graduate program, it was important for us to know we would have access to professors who had valuable consulting knowledge and skills and were willing to supervise and give us feedback. We also made sure that we could potentially work with athletes and coaches once enrolled in the program. This might sound simplistic but you must carefully examine your options because some programs are predominantly research-oriented and offer little or no applied opportunities. By contacting professors ahead of time and asking them about their own consulting experiences and the links they have with coaches and athletes, you will be able to make an informed choice in the selection of your program.

If becoming a sport psychology consultant is one of your goals, other criteria you should consider are opportunities for certification, number of supervised hours, and qualifications / reputation of your supervisor. If you have the option, choose to work with a trained, respected professional in the field who is willing to mentor your work and show you the “tricks of the trade.” We were fortunate to receive feedback from our supervisors and get several referrals to work with athletes of different ages and

levels. After demonstrating our skills and establishing a few contacts, we realized that word of mouth was the key, and our opportunities to continue working just grew.

Once you have enrolled into a specific program, it is understood that you will begin your training by taking courses to acquire background information and fundamental skills in sport psychology and/or counseling theory and application, before you formally start working with athletes. Depending on the number of courses offered each semester and the number of faculty members available to teach these courses, it may take over a year before you can begin some applied work. Once again, you can see how important it is to investigate your options when you are searching for a program. If there is only one or two professors to teach courses and supervise you, you might have to be patient and willing to postpone consulting for a while.

The choice of courses is also important. You want to make sure you will have the opportunity to develop a strong knowledge base, as well as valuable consulting skills that will enable you to be effective when you do begin your work. This means you should look for opportunities to practice. We had the chance to practice with our peers in some of our counseling classes. We had to film ourselves as well as conduct mock interviews in front of the class, after which we received feedback from the professor and our classmates. We also had to develop an intervention program for a clientele of our choice, which included a component on our personal consulting philosophy. This was an excellent learning experience and after these courses, we felt more prepared to go to work in real life settings.

Gaining Entry and Trust

Once you are ready to start consulting, there is another process with which you must get fully acquainted. It is that of gaining entry and trust. Before we actually started consulting, we read several articles and books on consulting / counseling (e.g., Botterill, 1990; Halliwell, 1990; Halliwell, Orlick, Ravizza and Rotella, 1999; Ivey, 1988; Orlick & Partington, 1987; Ravizza, 1990; Rotella, 1990; Salmela, 1990). We also formally and informally sought the advice of many experienced consultants to find out how to get started and how to make a first good impression. We did this within our own academic settings as well as at various conferences and meetings in which consulting and performance enhancement issues were discussed.

In our first consulting experiences, we tried to work with a coach who had some knowledge of sport psychology, believed in the benefits of mental preparation, and thus supported our work. We found it important to continually nurture our relationship with the coaches and support staff. One of us began working within a familiar sporting context from previous competitive experiences. This added credibility and helped to gain the trust and respect of coaches and athletes. However, in other situations, we were not familiar with the sport but we went to great lengths to learn about it. We read up on various rules, tactics, and lingo. We also asked coaches and athletes many questions, and spent considerable time observing practices. We showed a genuine interest in learning everything we could about the sport and the culture, and this undoubtedly facilitated our interactions.

As a student or young professional, it is wise to remain open to work with a variety of populations. Some students tend to want to

work with high profile elite teams or sports right from the start. In fact, it is probably a good idea to start with an individual athlete or a lower-level team just to get some experience, depending on the knowledge and skills you previously acquired as an athlete, coach or consultant. If you can, get involved at the beginning of a season or cycle so that the athletes see you as part of the team from the beginning.

Upon entering a consulting relationship, we met with coaches to discuss our roles, objectives and competencies. We were very honest about what we could and could not do. It was important to gain an understanding of their goals and expectations before starting to work with the athletes so that our interventions were congruent with theirs. We thus chose not to impose our preferred techniques or interventions. Instead, we allowed the situation, goals and needs of the coaches and athletes to guide us through the process. We certainly tried to educate them about issues related to mental and emotional preparation and challenged them to engage in some form of mental training on a daily basis, but we refrained from imposing any strategy or technique for which they were not ready or in which they outwardly were not interested.

Despite this, when it came time to work with the athletes, it was important that they be open and receptive to mental training to a certain extent. They had to be willing to try and practice some techniques before casting them away as ineffective. We encouraged them to apply what they learned in their daily training so that they wouldn't see mental training as an isolated process. One thing we chose to do early on was to work only with athletes who appeared willing to make a commitment right from the start. Remember that there are always some athletes who are apprehensive and do not

want to get involved. It is important to respect their opinions, particularly if they are forced by their coach to attend your individual and/or team sessions. We have worked with some athletes who at the beginning, straightforwardly stated that they did not believe in mental training and resisted participation in team activities, but two years later, thanked us for helping them adopt a positive attitude and for teaching them such valuable skills.

Another important lesson is that you should get familiarized with the context as much as possible *before* doing any intervention. You might want to talk at length with the coach, assistants, or captain(s), and attend practices to get a general idea of how the athletes behave and perform before you meet with them. It helps if the coach introduces you to the athletes during the first meeting because it shows that he/she believes in and supports the mental side of the game. Also, get to know the support staff because they are a great source of information. Make sure that you have a clear cut agreement with them in terms of your roles and responsibilities so that you do not overstep any boundaries.

On the issue of establishing trust, we would like to make a note that although we believe in the usefulness of assessment tools, we learned that it is best to administer them only after having gained the athletes' respect and trust. Some coaches and athletes have reservations regarding the use of questionnaires, so it is wise to discuss this option and ask their permission first. We have also realized that not all athletes benefit from filling out questionnaires. They may be beneficial if athletes are open and receptive to them, if the results are discussed in debriefing sessions, and they can readily use the information to enhance their performance.

Another lesson was coming to the realization that you need to pay your dues when you first start consulting. This means you must be prepared to do volunteer work. Oftentimes, paid positions are the result of previous volunteer experiences. We have talked at great length with some people about the issue of remuneration and it is still not clear. Some professionals are reticent to reveal how much they charge while others will gladly provide the information. At the doctorate level, we charged \$25.00 per hour, which was consistent with what we were paid for a teaching or research assistantship at the University of Ottawa in Canada. Keep in mind that charging athletes a minimal fee may make a difference in their level of commitment and adherence to meetings and their intervention program.

Also, if you want to be effective, your consulting work will most likely incur some personal costs. Plan to spend some money for materials and traveling to competitions. Yet, remember that it never hurts to ask your thesis or internship supervisor, or the team coach or manager if they have a budget for photocopies, books, tapes, videos, or traveling expenses. We were fortunate to receive some support from our graduate supervisors. Additionally, we had access to a private room to do our consulting work, as well as to different types of equipment such as a video camera, tape recorder, and dictaphone.

Trial and error is definitely part of the process when you are first starting. Nevertheless, it is extremely important that you receive ongoing feedback from trained professionals. Our weekly meetings with our research group and supervisor were extremely rewarding. These forums allowed us to discuss not only our research progress but also our evolving consulting skills and experiences. We would get constructive

feedback on our interactions and most importantly, learn from each other's successes and mistakes. Note that we have met students outside of our program who had a tendency to keep information to themselves. It was almost like they did not want to reveal their secrets for fear that other students would copy them. We feel that if you have the opportunity to be immersed in an environment where resources are there for you to learn, you should be sharing information to expand your knowledge base rather than limiting it. Collaboration can benefit everyone.

Building Relationships

The process of building relationships goes far beyond gaining the athletes and coaches' trust and respect. In fact, if you are planning on building strong and effective relationships, you should probably opt to work on improving them on more than a few occasions. We have found it is important to take your time when developing relationships, especially when working with a team. Allow the athletes to get to know you as a person. Go the extra mile to show that you care about matters both related and unrelated to their sport performance. Showing up early for practices and spending time in the coach's office or dressing room will give you an opportunity to interact with them in an informal way and also to get to know them as people, not just as athletes and coaches.

In addition to these types of interactions, you must establish where you will meet with the athletes for individual consultations. Some academic programs require that you meet with them in an office or classroom on campus, while others offer more flexibility. We had the opportunity to meet with athletes in various settings depending on their preferences or those of their coaches. To this day, we personally like to interact in

a natural milieu, that is, the athletes' training venue, our home, a café, or even outdoors. When we meet in an office or classroom, we try to make the environment as comfortable and as non-threatening as possible. We are also aware of gender and ethical issues involved in working with men as opposed to women. These can vary based on the institution or the association for which you work. Be informed of your options.

An important issue in building effective relationships is confidentiality. One of the first things you probably learned in your consulting courses is to keep all information about your clients confidential. This cannot be emphasized enough. If coaches want updates, relay information in a general fashion without revealing any names, unless the athletes give you permission to do so. This can be difficult at times because we have found ourselves in situations in which coaches have bluntly asked us: "What's going on with him?" or "What should I do with her?" You must be prepared to answer these types of question without jeopardizing the confidentiality you established with the athletes. Referring to a verbal or written agreement or contract you established with the coach at the beginning can be useful in justifying your actions.

We have heard the experts in our field mention that often their work involves spending time with athletes and coaches at practice and competitions, without doing any particular intervention or formal consultation. In lay terms, they simply hang out with them. Some of them have even said that sometimes they wonder what it is that influences a positive effect because periodically, they did not engage in any formal work. However, over the years, it became evident to them and to us as well that this is part of the process of not only gaining trust and respect, but also building belief and relationships.

Our commitment to developing positive relationships with athletes and coaches has led us to invest a lot of time standing in the “background,” observing and providing feedback when it is solicited. Similar to Salmela (1990), in many instances, we have found it best to wait for “teachable moments” to initiate or resume communication with athletes and coaches. This allows us to spend a significant amount of time listening rather than speaking. We noticed that many teachable moments occur when traveling with them to competitions. Some of our best talks have been done informally on the bus, in hotel rooms, or walking to and from sites.

In building strong connections with your clients and capitalizing on teachable moments, you should be flexible and willing to adapt to different situations. We have realized how important it is to be ready to change part of our plan or a specific intervention to meet the coaches’ and/or athletes’ needs and interests, particularly if an intervention is not that meaningful to them in the first place. One of us remembers asking a well-respected consultant how he prepared to work with a professional hockey team. His answer was: “You must always have a plan A, a plan B, and even a plan C in case things don’t work as planned on a particular day.” This implies a tremendous amount of preparation prior to meeting with athletes. It is not uncommon for us to spend a few hours preparing for a session or even four or five hours writing a personal relaxation script for an athlete.

Building reliable relationships obviously involves engaging in ongoing personal evaluation and drawing lessons from successes and failures. Face it, you will not always be effective as a consultant. In fact, you will most likely learn and grow by experimenting with different consulting /

counseling interventions, strategies, and techniques, much like you have learned in other areas of your life. It can be frustrating and even embarrassing to make mistakes, but do yourself a favor and accept the fact that it is part of the learning process. Even the experts have admitted and discussed several mistakes they have made throughout the years. What is important is that you learn from your personal errors and those of others as well.

It cannot be overemphasized, doing regular checks is useful and essential. An excellent way to monitor the effectiveness of your plans and interventions is to seek the coaches’ and athletes’ feedback on a regular basis. You do not always need an assessment form to do this, simply talk to them and be ready to accept criticism. It is also important to continually reassess their goals and needs, and yours as well. It has been effective for us to monitor their progress by asking many questions in person, over the telephone, or through e-mail.

Should you set some limits when establishing relationships with your clients? It is important to ask yourself this question because we often walk a fine line between being the athletes’ consultant and being their friend. Oftentimes, we work with athletes who are the same age as us or even older. There is no doubt that we develop strong bonds with them as they progress throughout a season, however, maintaining a certain distance allows us to keep a holistic view and to be more objective when it is important to do so. For us, this means, for example, that we refrain from socializing with the athletes outside of team activities. It is important to not only set limits but also to know your limitations as a consultant. Being objective will enable you to realize when you have to refer athletes who present

you with problems beyond your competencies, scope of knowledge, or even level of confidence. If you are not sure what to do in a particular situation, seek feedback from your mentor or supervisor, or talk to other professionals in the field. Remember that referring athletes does not mean that you are abandoning them. In cases where we did refer athletes, we continued to work with them on issues for which we were qualified and they respected us even more for being honest and for providing them with positive alternatives.

Effective consulting also requires that you be aware of and realistic about the time you can devote to your consulting work. It is not wise to commit more time than you can allocate. Because you must prove yourself, particularly in the early stages of your career, the quality of your work is extremely important. In some cases, you might have to restrict the number of athletes or teams with whom you will work at once. Preparing handouts, attending practices, competitions, and social events can be time consuming. Also, you cannot forget your course work or thesis/dissertation. If you are as passionate as we are about consulting, you will find it easy to get carried away with the number of hours you invest into your applied work, however, you must rely on your organizational skills and plan accordingly to ensure you meet all of your program goals. Let us remind you to be patient with your progress and that of the athletes with whom you work. Sometimes, it takes more than a

year for athletes to buy into the process of mental training. Despite this, we find that seeing or hearing the positive effects we have had on one athlete makes our entire experience worthwhile. Note that we prefer to refrain from taking credit for the successes of athletes. Instead, we congratulate them on their work and the outstanding effort they invested into becoming mentally prepared. We recognize that we are only a small piece of a large puzzle, and staying humble is a strength that can take you very far.

In sum, we have learned tremendously from our graduate training courses and readings, as well as from our exchanges with athletes, coaches, peers, and other consultants. We are satisfied with the experiences and skills we acquired as graduate students, however, we did have to be quite proactive. There is much room for improvement in terms of offering students more formal, structured, and supervised practica and internships. We certainly hope that a course of action will be taken in response to Silva et al.'s (1999) recommendations for enhancing the training of graduate students. We also hope that the lessons we shared in this paper will help students to increase the quality of their work. We invite your comments and feedback, and encourage you to organize your own workshops at conferences and to publish some of your lessons so that we can continue growing together and making a positive difference in other people's lives.

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