

No Finish Line: Reflecting on Gender, Race, and Class in the Sport Management Classroom

Michael Odio

University of Cincinnati

The visibility and cultural relevance of sport make it a platform through which people examine a variety of social issues, with race, ethnicity, and gender among the most salient. After over a decade of teaching courses in sport management, a discipline that examines the sport and the sport industry, I have reflected on the makeup of the student body, my own identity, and the seemingly elusive goal of inclusion in the classroom.

The monumental struggle and underrepresentation of women and minorities in playing and managing sport is a well-documented issue, and the remedy should be the responsibility of everyone remotely involved in athletics. The sport industry is also notorious for low starting wages and exploitative practices such as unpaid internships, which tends to disadvantage people from less-wealthy backgrounds who have more difficulties pursuing opportunities and advancing in the industry and into decision-making roles. Combined with gender and racial discrimination, the journey to become leaders and executives in sport organizations is influenced by a person's resources and socio-economic background.

In my teaching, I have learned to promote the voices of women and minorities through the readings and videos used in course modules, guest speakers featured in a course, and through sharing my own Latin American heritage. Course topics such as the hiring process and workplace discrimination in sport bring forward these issues for discussion as well. Topics of race and gender are rightly visible throughout most courses, and extracurricular initiatives to advance the careers

of women and minority students do fantastic work. However, I cannot recall discussing the topic of social class or economic background with students, and it seems largely absent in faculty discussions.

Across sport management, and certainly in the classes I have taught, most students are white cis-gendered men. Combined with the salience of the challenges of women and minorities in sport, the dominance of white men has led me to trying to stay particularly in-tune with the experiences of underrepresented students. But several years ago, I adjusted my pre-semester surveys asking students for details about extracurriculars and other responsibilities. This was partly to help understand their experiences so I could better craft course discussions and anticipate absences for university obligations. However, I found that many students had two or three major responsibilities ranging from varsity athletics, childcare, and some even working two or three jobs. One response that stood out to me was that of a student who worked as a bartender, often until three in the morning, and who then had to be in my classroom at eight. From here, I continued reflecting on conversations with students about their ongoing obligations and lives outside the classroom. I began to see the differences that were always there between students based on their backgrounds, such as wealthier students' ability to stay after class and take on additional career-enhancing opportunities. Their extensive social networks were also a massive benefit, with some students taking advantage of family connections to gain opportunities for job shadowing or creating an internship that was never advertised or available for anyone else.

Within this scenario, it was impossible to escape several realizations. First, there was the racial component, as students of color tended to have fewer of the influential social connections and fewer financial resources. Second, was that social class was never discussed, and in the minds of students, might not come across as an advantage or disadvantage, but even among white male students, there were divides between those from wealthier backgrounds whose parents went to college, and those who were from more resource-limited backgrounds and have less guidance for how to succeed in college. Third, was my own parents' struggles through their college experiences, both first generation college students, one paying their own way as a nontraditional

student and one relying on their parents' support but with a different set of struggles. Altogether, this has caused me to reflect on my practices and policies.

I began to consider the amount and nature of homework I was assigning. How could students who are working two or three jobs be able to contribute effectively to group projects, or read three chapters over the weekend, or be effective in their class presentation the morning after working late? Students of all genders and races can struggle with prioritizing a dense collection of extracurricular activities, and certainly, managing a busy schedule is a skill that all students should develop. Still, it was clear that there were some expectations being put on students that were causing unnecessary strain on those with fewer resources and less flexibility. This hit me particularly hard when a student told me about how they had to decide between missing a shift at work and taking a lower grade in a course.

I eventually developed certain guidelines for the design of my courses. This includes having flexible deadlines for all assignments and always giving at least one weekday and weekend day for any assignment such as discussion board post assigned on Friday cannot be due sooner than Tuesday. I also allow students to opt-into presentation dates based on personal circumstances like accommodating their work schedule. In addition, I have no graded attendance. I overcommunicate past examples of making these kinds of accommodations. I know that simply expressing that students could ask me for help is not sufficient. I hold onto and share past examples to try to clearly convey to students that I am interested in their success and that I understand their challenges as people navigating school and life.

These guidelines I set for my courses were more pertinent for in-person delivery, such as no graded attendance, with some certainly being relevant for online courses, such as flexible deadlines. As I have been implementing and adjusting these guidelines for four semesters of courses, I have come away with a set of observations on how it has changed my approach to course design and my presence in the classroom, as well as a sense of how effective these changes have been.

Most notably, my course design has shifted away from trying to outline a strict set of instructions to follow in order to earn points, and towards providing an invitation for students to work on a challenge that they can find interesting and productive for themselves. This is similarly evident in my demeanor in class (or in online videos) where I often share with students my reasoning behind certain course design choices and how I set my deadlines and which ones are flexible – all with their experience and interests in mind. From this, students can understand that for certain assignments, I would rather that the assignments be done well than be done on time. In contrast, I want students to understand that there are cases where other students are depending on their timeliness, such as for discussion posts where replies are needed, and a timely submission is important. Overall, it has appeared that these changes have been well received by students. It is not an unreasonable amount of work to track a few late submissions, and it is typically never more than 10-15% of students who take advantage of the flexible deadline. As these changes overlap with the return to in-person classes following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, there are arguably more students in need of such considerations as they struggle with their employment, other responsibilities, and mental and physical health. There has been no clear pattern, whether in-person or online, as to any particular demographic taking more advantage of it than others, but there have been several distinct instances of students telling me about having large projects in other classes or work responsibilities that have led to them turning work in late and thanking me for the flexibility.

The story with attendance policies has been somewhat different. As I tend to be scheduled for early courses, often with an 8:00 am start time, giving students the freedom to sleep in with less tangible consequences (e.g. missing out on a lesson versus losing 10 points) has likely led to some students staying home for less urgent reasons than I would like. However, maintaining the attention and interest of students in the class and making them feel that there is something to gain from class has reshaped how I view each in-person class session. I know some students have tough early commutes and pay out of their own pocket for parking just to come to class, something a student with more financial resources would be less likely to struggle with. That raises the stakes in my mind in terms of making each class period count. I do not want

to waste students' time or resources, particularly for students who work to support themselves financially. Attendance in my classes has fallen (compared to pre-pandemic) with some students consistently not attending and trying to only submit work online so they can pass the class. Inevitably, these students earn lower grades, seem to achieve less growth, and generally struggle. In many cases, there are students who work full-time or close to it and would have likely preferred an online class.

However, some students have shared struggles with anxiety and other legitimate mental health issues, and I have been able to productively plot a course back for them in the class. In all, this approach has had mixed results, but it continues to push me to improve as an educator. I have started to consider the possibility of using contract grading and including clauses for students to negotiate alternatives for missing certain classes and incorporating more hybrid options. These types of steps would create more dialogue around attendance and may help to create a stronger sense of responsibility, while still allowing some students to miss some classes when they need to and still be successful.

While I am still striving to improve and develop these guidelines for myself and how I communicate them, I am sure some students may take advantage of lenient deadlines and attendance policies who did not need to. Nevertheless, this is a small risk compared to the benefits, and I have found that it has been helpful to appeal to students' sense of responsibility and communicating that I am more interested in their success and their learning than meeting a particular deadline. There is no finish line when it comes to inclusion. Despite progress for women and minorities, there is far more work to be done in and out of the classroom for them and for all students.