

To Seek or not to Seek: A Current Analysis of Stakeholder Perceptions of NASSM Approval

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Since the first sport management master's program began 40 years ago (Parkhouse, 2005), the field has evolved into a variety of degree-seeking programs with only marginal consistency across institutions (Mahoney, Mondello, Hums, & Judd, 2004). After the creation of curriculum guidelines, further attempts at consistency were created by developing a process for institutions to gain approval status (NASPE-NASSM Joint Task Force, 1993). Still, little is understood about the nature of these programs and the impact of these guidelines for approval status. Given that numerous institutions spend great efforts to seek this status, a long overdue assessment is needed.

Without such assessment one cannot accurately understand what is occurring at institutions (Lawson, 1990). With continued expansion of sport management programs, researchers have little understanding about the characteristics of schools where these programs exist. While approved programs guarantee some small sense of consistency by virtue of status, little is understood about the curriculum, faculty, structure, and institutional uniqueness of non-approved programs.

The label of approval status does not provide complete insight into the reasons why schools seek approval or remain independent. Currently, 27 master's programs are approved, and 73 master's programs are not approved (NASSM, 2005) in the United States. Because many faculty believe that approval is necessary for the credibility of the field (Bolger, Cuneen, & Schoonmaker, 2005), it is important to understand the rationale of program directors and their respective approach on the decision for approval status. Perhaps more essential however, is to understand the potential reasons why nearly 75% of all masters programs are not approved.

The purpose of this research was to examine the institutional demographics of both approved and non-approved sport management master's degree programs, and determine rationales as to why some institutions have chosen to seek approval and others have not. An original web-based survey was created to ascertain these institutional factors as well as perceptions of key decision makers. Ninety-four of the 100 institutions offering master's programs were contacted via email. Forty-eight of the 94 surveys (51%) were successfully completed.

Chi-square analysis showed no significant difference between approved and non-approved programs on the institutional demographics of type of master's degree offered, the college in which the sport management program is housed, number of full time faculty, date of program inception, and the NCAA classification of the athletic program. As the curriculum standards and approval process were created to "assure that students have a broad foundation of sport management coursework taught by appropriate professionals" (SMPRC, 2000, "Preamble"), this finding that college and degree type variation is not significant suggests that these institutions may be more similar than originally anticipated. Surprisingly, no differences were found between the programs based on their year of program inception. The assumption that the availability of standards would impact the number of programs seeking approval was not upheld.

The majority of approved schools stated that a reason for seeking approval was based in the notion of internal and external prestige. This "label of approval" seems to be a symbol of quality within respective institutions, as well as to those institutions who may be evaluating their institution externally. Several non-approved programs also indicated that they served a specialized population. Non-approved institutions with larger numbers of faculty cited the time cost, the uniqueness of their program, and their strong tradition as reasons not to seek approval.

Further analysis of some non-approved program comments indicated that NASSM officials may have some concerns to address. Opinions such as "(we see) no perceived benefit to the students" and "approval has no meaning" illustrate potential opposition to the current standards. Some respondents indicated a fear that NASSM will end up "controlling" sport management programs like "NATA controls athletic training programs." Despite these somewhat negative comments, approximately one-third of non-approved programs feel that their institution will seek approval in the next five years.