

A conjoint analysis of choice preferences for sport management programs

Gonzalo Bravo, West Virginia University
Doyeon Won, University of Georgia

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Abstract 120**

An extensive body of literature has been published in the past twenty-five years regarding the overall college admission process. Particular interest has been given to understand factors that influence prospective students' attendance to college as well as factors that influence their choice for a determined major and program (Kallio, 1995; Litten, 1982; Martin & Dixon, 1991). Previous research in this line suggests that the whole process of college as well as program choice are related and involve internal as well as external factors that are beyond the prospective student's control (Chapman, 1981; Hossler & Gallaher, 1987). Recently, a handful of studies have examined college choice, major choice, and program choice in the context of both undergraduate and graduate applicants in sport management (see Crockett, 2005; Lewis & Quaterman, 2006; Jisha & Pitts, 2004). Nonetheless, and while these studies provide a preliminary insight about factors that affect student's choice to enter the field of sport management as well as to decide to which program to apply, these studies have not provided an accurate picture of what the student's preferences are. For the most part, most studies, in college as well as program choice, have used the traditional summated rated scale survey method, a method that provides information on the level of importance of the factor but cannot fully explain an applicants' preferences, particularly, when more than one factor is rated high ('very important') in the same scale. Consequently, previous findings that have used this method become incomplete, at least from the perspective of marketing applicability, because in studies of choice not only is it important to know the relative relevance of the factor, but more important is to understand the actual consumer's preference. As a result, by better understanding consumer's preferences, decision makers can implement better strategies to satisfy consumer's needs.

This study is drawn from the marketing literature which utilizes conjoint analysis methodology, a common method used by marketers to study consumers' preferences and market segmentation (Green & Srinivasan, 1978; 1990; Green & Krieger, 1991). In conjoint analysis methodology a set of attributes is selected based on known characteristics, relevant literature and focus groups (Malhotra, 2004). Once relevant attributes have been selected, a set of three to four levels for each attribute is defined to create a factorial design that includes specific sets of scenarios of the combine attributes and levels. Ultimately, in conjoint analysis, respondents rate each scenario from the 'non-preferred at all' to the 'most preferred one'. The aim here is to obtain a better insight into the preferred set of attributes that ultimately influence program choice.

The purpose of this study was twofold: (a) to determine which attributes influence sport management applicants to attend a sport management masters program, and (b) to determine which of these attributes were perceived as the most preferred in a sample of sport management undergraduate students. To achieve these research objectives, a two-step process was followed: (1) a focus group to determine critical program choice attributes, and (2) a conjoint experiment were conducted.

Focus group methodology (Krueger, 1988; Malhotra, 2004) was conducted to determine attributes that influence program choice of masters' students. Nine students (six males and three females) enrolled in a sport management masters program participated in the focus group. After the session was completed, participants were requested to list -in order of preference- and rate (1 = somewhat important, and 5 = very important) the attributes that influenced their decision to choose the sport management program they were attending. In addition, a complete verbatim transcription of the focus group session was done. Content analysis and frequency analysis of the attributes listed by participants revealed that twenty-one attributes were identified to influence students' program choice. Researchers selected the seven most repeated attributes as indicated in the focus group results. Also, the cut-off number was based on the recommended number of attributes to conduct the full-profile procedure in conjoint analysis (Green & Srinivasan, 1978; 1990). Program choice attributes that were selected included: program reputation (highly reputed or not reputed), location (in town, in-state, or out-of-state), type and availability of graduate assistantships (athletic department assistantship, teaching assistantship, or no assistantship), program environment/friendliness (very friendly or not so friendly), program length (12 months, 18 months, or 24 months), tuition (\$10K, \$20K, or \$30K), and NCAA affiliations (Division I, II, or III). These attributes and their respective levels were then used to compile profiles or scenarios of hypothetical sport management graduate programs. After program choice attributes were selected, 550 sport management undergraduate students (juniors and seniors) attending twelve programs were invited to take part in the conjoint experiment. A total of 465 (84.5%) students responded the questionnaire. Data was collected using a convenience sampling method with a paper-and-pencil survey. The conjoint experiment asked students to rate their preference (11-point scale, from 0 = do not prefer to 10 = strongly prefer) in each of the 18 program choice scenarios that resulted from the factorial design by combining attributes with levels.

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Ordinary least squares analysis of all responses revealed that NCAA affiliation (20.42%) was the most important attribute, followed by program environment (15.57%), program reputation (14.86%), graduate assistantship (14.09%), cost/tuition (12.82%), location (11.40%), and program length (10.83%). Respondents most preferred a sport management graduate program that is highly reputed, very friendly to applicants, affiliated with NCAA Division I, and located in state, provide a graduate assistantship in the athletic department, and costs \$10,000 per academic year as tuition, and takes 12 months to graduate. K-means cluster analysis was conducted to identify subgroups of participants who had similar attribute preference patterns and the results revealed four clusters. Cluster 1, the largest group (n = 155), gave the highest importance ratings to NCAA affiliations (34.36%). Cluster 2 (n = 116) based their preferences primarily on the availability and type of graduate assistantships (23.71%). Cluster 3 (n = 111) placed priority on program environment. Cluster 4 (n = 83) considered program reputation (26.03%) as the most important attribute in selecting a graduate program.

Results of this study demonstrated the importance of conjoint analysis methodology when assessing students' preferences as consumers. This study contributed to expand the knowledge and understanding about the factors that influence program choice in sport management master's programs. It contributed by indicating not only what attributes students prefer but also in what capacity they prefer these attributes. Further, this study also provides an integrated view of the preferred attributes that matters to sport management students which ultimately might influence their program choice. Future conjoint analysis studies should include prospective applicants as opposed to existing students. Therefore, some of the limitations in this study include sample population (undergraduate students) and sampling bias (data from only voluntary participants). The theoretical and practical implications of these results were discussed.