Beginning with Ginzburg (1951), and Super (1961), the concept of career development was introduced into vocational psychology, and the emphasis on the literature shifted from a static conception of matching people with jobs to the study of an ongoing process (Hotchkiss, 1979). From these early theories came statements that describe vocational choices as compromises between desires and expectations based on reality (Gottfredson & Becker, 1981). While some literature provides research on careers in non-sport fields (Osipow, 1983; Pavalko, 1971; Young & Borg, 1990), only a small body of literature addresses careers in sport. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to examine the accuracy of sport management graduate and undergraduate student perceptions of sport management career choices when compared to perceptions of sport management practitioners. A secondary purpose of the study was to analyze differences in such perceptions over a thirteen year period, comparing only graduate students’ and practitioners’ perceptions.

The sample was inclusive of all United States sport management graduate and undergraduate programs listed via the North American Society of Sport Management’s (NASSM) website at www.nassm.org. After identifying sport management programs via the NASSM Web site, program coordinators of approximately 165 graduate sport management and 200 undergraduate sport management programs were asked to distribute an electronic survey link to all of their sport management students. Sport management practitioners were selected from multiple areas and included those working in major professional leagues, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I-A (Football Bowl Subdivision-FBS) college athletics programs and college/intramural departments. The Sports Market Place Directory and professional team/franchise Web sites were used to identify the professional sport franchise practitioners in the National Basketball Association (30 teams), National Hockey League (30 teams), National Football League (32 teams) and Major League Baseball (30 teams). The National Directory of College Athletics handbook and athletics department Web sites were used to identify NCAA Division I-A (FBS) college athletics department practitioners (119), and the Recreation and Sports Directory handbook was used to recruit the intramural/recreation department practitioners, also from NCAA Division I-A (FBS) institutions (119). All of the sport management practitioners were provided an electronic survey link to complete the instrument.

Graduate and undergraduate sport management students and sport management practitioners were asked to complete a self-constructed survey that provided information regarding perceptions of career choices in sport management. Specifically, participants were asked to provide information pertaining to certain “concepts” that surround career choices in sport management; a five-point Likert-scale and a ranking system were employed to determine the level of participants’ perceptions.

As noted, a secondary purpose of the study was to review current and past perceptions of sport management graduate students and sport management practitioners. Thus, data collected from the current study was compared to data collected in 1996 to determine if overall perceptions of sport management career choices have changed among the two groups. Data collected in 1996 utilized sport management graduate students (n=94) and sport management practitioners (n=77) from the United States. Sport management graduate students were chosen from 81 sport management graduate programs located in the United States while practitioners working in the area of major professional leagues, Division I-A (FBS) college athletics programs and college intramural/recreational departments were included. Statistical analysis of the data using a t-test, tests for independent samples (differences in proportion), frequencies and means was utilized to compare the perceptions of the two groups. Differences did exist in the sport management graduate students and sport management practitioners’ perceptions of career choices as it related to the length of time for advancement/promotion in their chosen field of sport management (mean difference - .93 years, P - .038) and their expected salary earned at their first full-time sport management position (mean difference - $5,753, P - .00). Also, utilizing a test for independent samples (critical Z value of 3.29), differences did exist in the sport management graduate students and sport management practitioners’ perceptions of several competencies/responsibilities viewed as most important to be successful in their chosen area of sport management.
These included communication skills (Z = 6.9), fund-raising skills (Z = 5.0), marketing skills (Z = 4.2) and public relations skills (Z = 4.5). In addition, differences did exist in the sport management graduate students and sport management practitioners’ perceptions of the factors that should lead students to choose a career in sport management (using a test for independent samples with a critical Z value of 3.29). These factors included friend/colleague advice (Z = -3.7), relationship(s) with players (Z = -3.3), and working with people (Z = -3.9). Finally, utilizing a test for independent samples with a critical Z value of 3.29, differences did exist in the sport management graduate students and sport management practitioners’ perceptions of the factors (outside academics) that should prepare sport management graduate students for a career in sport management. These included doing an internship (Z = -6.1), getting practitioners’ advice (Z = -3.5), and reading of professional journals (Z = -7.9).

A limited amount of research exists relating to careers in sport and the vast majority of research thus far has been directed towards athletes and coaches, not at understanding the nature of career development, career choice, and career experience by sport management students and practitioners. Continued research concerning sport management students (graduate and undergraduate) with respect to identifying accurate perceptions of the sport management discipline is needed so that the industry can continue to evolve and transition from an occupation to that of a profession. Also, with the number of graduate and undergraduate sport and management programs in the United States more than doubling in the last 13 years, instructors/professors and practitioners stand to benefit from research that provides additional insight on how to instruct students to make better career choices. Finally, sport management students stand to benefit from research that will better prepare them to choose an undergraduate or graduate sport management program of study and to enter the sport management industry.