The Selection of a Sport Management Major: Factors Influencing Student Choice from a Consumer-Oriented Perspective

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The cost of college attendance is rising. During the 2008-2009 academic year, students attending a 4-year public university paid an average tuition (including room and board) of $14,256; students enrolled at a 4-year private institution paid nearly $32,000 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Given the economic downturn in the United States, current and prospective students are more likely to analyze the cost/benefit of attending college by pursuing college majors that have financial viability in the job market after graduation rather than considering the intellectual, social, and cultural benefits of a college education (Emanuel & Adams, 2006; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2010). For example, Noel-Levitz (2010) found that the current economic crisis has caused 46% of prospective college students to rethink schools to which they would apply or attend. As a result, higher education administrators have called on faculty to strategize ways in which to fill classroom seats, as well as recruit and retain diverse students and faculty (Altbach, 2005; Lomas, 2007).

Understanding current student populations should be of increasing importance to sport management faculty as new programs are established at colleges and universities each year. For example, the composition of the college student population has changed dramatically in the last 40 years. In 1970, women comprised a little over 40% of students attending higher education institutions, while the total minority population (i.e., Black, Hispanic, Asian, and American Indian) stood at only 15%. Today, participation in higher education by women and racial and ethnic minorities is on the rise. For example, women earned 57% of the bachelor’s degrees conferred in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Representation of racial and ethnic minorities has increased to 32%. The percentage of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asian Americans earning bachelors’ degrees has increased to 9.8%, 8%, and 7%, respectively, since 1980 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

While the increase in gender and ethnic diversity in higher education is impressive, studies have shown that the demographics sport management academic programs may be lagging behind (Cunningham, 2008; Hancock & Hums, 2011; Hums, 1994; Moore, Parkhouse, & Konrad, 2004). Research has shown that women comprise only 30 to 40 percent of sport management undergraduate programs (Hancock & Hums, 2011). Hums (1994) reported that African-American men represented 11% of students in sport management and African-American women represented only 3%. Asian Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans represented less than 3%. A follow-up study by Hancock and Hums (2011) found that while the number of African American males in sport management academic programs is increasing the number of African American females, Asians, and Hispanics remains low (>5%).

Sport management undergraduate programs exist at approximately 246 colleges and universities around the United States (NASSM, 2010). In addition, 152 institutions of higher education offer Master’s degrees in sport management, while 25 offer opportunities for a terminal degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.) (NASSM, 2010). The growth of sport management programs in the United States offers sport management faculty the opportunity to evaluate unique attributes of the program, assess students’ experiences, and develop a marketing plan that will attract students and make the program more competitive and diverse.

Therefore, the purpose of this presentation is to discuss factors contributing to the selection of a sport management undergraduate major. Additionally, we will examine the difference in selection factors based on sex (male/female) and race (minorities/Caucasians).

Data will be collected in January and February of 2011 from undergraduate sport management majors at multiple institutions, both public and private. Students in introductory sport management courses will be targeted in order to capture students likely to be at the major selection phase of their academic careers and to avoid biases that may result from their time in the major. Participants will complete a questionnaire assessing criteria for major selection developed from the extant literature (Beggs et al., 2008; Crampton, 2006; Galotti, 1999; Malgwi et al., 2005; Strasser
et al., 2002; Walstrom et al., 2008) and adapted to represent unique aspects of the sport management major. In addition, participants will complete demographic data (sex, race, parents’ level of education, athletic experience), and open-ended questions will be used to capture additional themes. Descriptive statistics will be presented concerning each major selection factor. MANOVA will be used to determine differences between demographic groups.

Identifying the factors that influence the selection of a sport management major will be used to help departments tailor their marketing and recruiting efforts to various target markets in an effort to develop a more diverse classroom and workforce. This presentation will (a) give sport management academics a better idea of why students select a sport management major and (b) offers sport management academics practical suggestions for program promotion and marketing.