

Why Seek Specialized Accreditation? A Case Study of COSMA

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**Research/statistical
methodology
Abstract 2013-085**

**Friday, May 31, 2013
8:30 AM**

**20-minute oral presentation
(including questions)
(Room 404)**

Relevance to Sport Management

The Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA) developed after NASSM and NASPE agreed that there was a need to provide a higher level of quality assurance to students enrolling in sport management programs and to the employers hiring graduates of those programs. The agreed perception was that institutions, students, employers, and the general public would all benefit from the external verification of quality provided through COSMA's accreditation process and from the process of continuous quality improvement. After more than four years, what is the experience of COSMA members? What does the community of sport management programs and individual COSMA members think about the value of COSMA accreditation? What reasons do programs seek COSMA accreditation? What barriers exist to seeking COSMA accreditation? What does this tell us about the future of accreditation in sport management?

Review of Relevant Literature

Over time, accreditation has become the acceptable method to provide external accountability for the quality of education at colleges and universities. Diploma mills are proliferating and create an environment of uncertainty: Is this degree from a legitimate educational institution? (CHEA, 2011) For institutions in the U.S., we have a system of regional accrediting bodies that help create that certainty. For specialized areas, such as sport management, COSMA was designed to help answer the question: How is a sport management degree from a legitimate educational program constructed and maintained?

Through recognition by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), specialized accrediting bodies maintain consistent standards of external accountability and independence of decision-making from the entities that create them. CHEA standards help regulate those organizations that are tasked with holding programs publicly accountable in a voluntary and collegial process (CHEA, 2009). COSMA's orientation toward accreditation mirrors those values outlined by CHEA and include: mission centrality, institutional autonomy, and academic freedom (CHEA, 2005).

What draws some programs to seek COSMA accreditation and what holds others back? Previous research from the perspective of faculty and administrators shows differences between members and non-members in their perception of the value of specialized accreditation (Williams & Colles, 2009). This research aims to identify some of the key factors that draw sport management programs toward COSMA accreditation and those factors that make it difficult or challenging. For the future of the sport management field, recognizing barriers to COSMA accreditation will inform the initiative to guide sport management toward high academic quality and high job placement for graduates of sport management programs.

Purpose/Objectives of the Study

The purpose and objectives of this study are the following:

- to collect and compare demographic information about COSMA institutional members and non-members
- to understand what factors motivate institutions to seek COSMA accreditation and what barriers might hinder them or delay seeking accreditation
- to uncover what support sport management programs need from the accrediting body and what current assistance and services are helping

2013 North American Society for Sport Management Conference (NASSM 2013)

Methodology and Data Analysis

Two surveys were designed – one for current COSMA institutional members (N=40) and one for individual members (N=32) of COSMA and “prospective” members (N=148). Prospective members are defined as individuals who have attended a COSMA training or presentation or who have contacted COSMA for information. The foci of the surveys are on demographics (accreditation status, size, teaching/research, public/private, types of sport management degree programs), reasons to join COSMA, barriers to joining COSMA, support needed from COSMA, and current levels of support received from COSMA. Online surveys were launched twice for one month: June 2012 and October 2012 to allow for a maximum number of responses from this finite population.

Discussion/Implications/Applications

Preliminary data analysis shows that there are no significant differences between the demographics of COSMA member institutions and non-member institutions; a variety of programs at a diversity of institutions are drawn to seek COSMA accreditation. COSMA members want the accreditation process to help them to be the best program they can be, to attract students, and to increase visibility for their programs. For many programs, state or institutional requirements are not motivators to seek COSMA accreditation. Funding cuts, not seeing a return on investment, and a loss of support from the institution’s administration are factors that might hinder continuation of COSMA membership. Surprisingly, COSMA members did not report a need to use COSMA to gain resources for their programs. Additional analysis that compares member program responses with non-member program responses will be presented. Programs need one-on-one assistance and currently report receiving guidance at all stages of the accreditation process from COSMA. Programs also want data related to the benefits of accreditation. For future research, this data is being collected and is forthcoming as more programs become accredited.