Assessing Stakeholder Satisfaction of Graduate Sport Management Programs

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Introduction
A 2012 survey of sport industry professionals by Turnkey Sports published in the SportsBusiness Journal (King, 2012) found those with a sport management graduate degree not only earn less than other graduate degree holders, but also less than those with a sport management bachelor’s degree. Such a report is a concern for both graduate students pursuing an advanced sport management degree and the faculty members teaching in graduate programs, particularly when past research suggests career retention and progression are often directly tied to salary (Gould & Penley, 1984). One area of interest to many educators and administrators is stakeholder satisfaction with program design and content. Several researchers have examined the impact of degree satisfaction on a number of variables such as job satisfaction, dropout rate, and motivation (Bruce, 2010; Kressel, 1990; Shure, Jansen, Harskamp, 2006; Tontodonato, 2006) in a variety of academic majors including nursing (Kantek & Kazanci, 2012), criminal justice (Tontodonato, 2006), and business (Bruce, 2010). However, no study to date has examined student and alumni degree satisfaction within sport management graduate programs.

The purpose of this study was to examine satisfaction levels of both current students and alumni of graduate Sport Management programs in the United States. The study also investigated group mean differences across several variables for current and former graduate students, and examined group mean differences relative to a variety of demographic variables such as gender, graduate assistantship opportunities available, effort exerted by the student, and type of undergraduate degree possessed.

Literature Review
Student satisfaction has been studied for decades across several disciplines as program directors and university administrators logically found it important to assess higher education’s primary stakeholders. The early and seminal work in student satisfaction stemmed from job satisfaction research (Betz, Klingensmith & Menne, 1970; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969), but eventually morphed into a function of consumer satisfaction (Chadwick & Ward, 1987; Hartman & Schmidt, 1995). As the study of student satisfaction evolved, the construct was included in a number of studies that focused on career progression and job satisfaction.

In the developmental stages of the academic field of sport management, program quality and curriculum content were distinct foci of sport management researchers. Several articles were published throughout the 1980s and early 1990s centering on topics from career preparation (Brassie, 1989), to program design and assessment (DeSensi, Kelley, Blanton, & Beitel, 1990; Parkhouse, 1987). The data in most of these studies, however, was comprised of curriculum and syllabi and lacked the first person account of student or alumni attitudes and opinions. A few years later, researchers conducted a number of studies exploring topics indirectly related to student satisfaction and graduate program outcomes using students as research participants. Parks (1994) examined the employment status of sport management undergraduate alumni of one university to determine demographic information, graduate school status, placement strategies, current positions, and salaries. Brown (1990) studied potential factors for student academic success and its impact on employability. Kjeldsen (1990) explored the career trajectory of sport professionals from a descriptive perspective, and Parks and Parra (1994) compared the satisfaction level of those graduates who entered into the sport industry and those who chose a different industry. While the results of all of these studies varied from sample to sample, the research provided an empirical foundation for improved sport management curriculum. That said, the sport industry and sport management education has evolved greatly since 1994 and each of the studies’ research setting was limited to one institution. Since then, a few studies in the field of sport management have examined the impact of the internship process on career decision making and student
satisfaction such as Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent, and Turner (2005) and Yoh and Choi (2011), with mixed results.

Methods and Results

In order to examine satisfaction levels of current graduate students and alumni, a 26-item graduate sport management degree program satisfaction instrument was developed and administered electronically to both populations of seven graduate sport management programs. Instrument validity was addressed through review by a panel of experts including several sport administration professors and industry professionals, an expert in survey methodology for the Odum Institute for Social Science Research, and a pilot group of ten students. Utilizing the programs’ alumni databases and current student rosters, a total of 556 invitations were disseminated, yielding a response rate of 46% (N = 257). Among all respondents, 72% (N = 185) were alumni and 28% (N = 72) were currently enrolled in a sport management graduate program.

Overall, respondents seemed satisfied with their experience, rating satisfaction to pursue a master’s degree in sport management a 5.12 and their satisfaction level with their specific sport management program a 4.65 on a 6-point Likert-type scale. The courses respondents found most beneficial were current topics, sport and society, sport marketing, and sport ethics. Courses deemed least beneficial included statistics, international sport, and research methods. Alumni rated the importance of obtaining a master’s degree in order to land a sport industry job significantly lower than current students. On the other hand, alumni rated the quality of instruction they received and quality of faculty advising significantly higher than current students. Group mean differences among the independent variables of gender, graduate assistantship opportunities, effort exerted (while enrolled in the graduate program), and undergraduate major were examined for several dependent variables. Few significant differences among factors were uncovered, with one notable exception. Students who earned their undergraduate degree in business were consistently less satisfied with how well their graduate program taught them various sport management skills (such as event management, facility management, financial management, leadership, sponsorship measurement, and strategic planning) compared to students with undergraduate degrees in sport management, sport-related studies, or other majors. Related to this point, when respondents were asked what elements should be emphasized more heavily in graduate sport management programs, qualitative responses overwhelmingly suggested fundamental business courses.

Discussion and Implications

Results of the study suggest that while most students are satisfied with their decision to pursue an advanced college degree in sport management, current graduate sport management programs have room to improve in areas such as faculty advising and strength of business-related or research-related content delivered in classes. Complete descriptive statistics, ANOVA tables, qualitative comments, and implications for sport management stakeholders will be presented and discussed.