Enhancing the Credibility of Sport Management Programs: An Assessment of Publications, Presentations and Research Interests

Jimmy Smith, Niagara University

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Over the past four decades, the discipline of sport management has seen tremendous growth around the world, especially in the United States. Since the inception of the first master’s sport management degree at Ohio University in 1966 (Stier, 1993), institutions that offer an undergraduate and/or graduate degree programs have grown exponentially from 44 programs in 1982 (Lewis, 1982; Parkhouse, 1987) to 211 programs in 1993 (Weese, 1995) and now to its current level of 438 sport management programs (NASSM, 2013).

Scholars using platforms such as the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) conference and the Journal of Sport Management (JSM) to discuss issues of status and credibility began in the late 1980s and continue today. Studies on the improvements of sport management program status and credibility have focused on the analysis of sport management guidelines, curriculum and accreditation (Boucher, 1998; Jones, Brooks & Mak, 2008; Mahoney & Pitts, 1998), faculty preparation and qualifications (deHaan, 2011; Mahony, Mondello, Hums & Judd, 2004), and the conundrum of where a sport management program should be ‘housed’ within an institution (Chalip, 2006; Costa, 2005; Jones, Brooks & Mak, 2008; Pitts, 2001; Parkhouse, 1987). The sport management field has seen quality discussions on the topics noted earlier. Through her research of 17 leading sport management scholars on the future of sport management and the path to improve the field’s status and credibility, Costa (2005) noted that members of the sport management field need to improve their direct involvement with this process, also implying that limited research of additional credibility characteristics such as peer-reviewed journal submission locations, conference presentations and faculty research interests.

The purpose of this study was to critically review the current NASSM cohort of nearly 450 institutions by analyzing sport management faculty journal publications, regional, national and international conference presentations and research interests. The timeliness of this project is appropriate as past and present scholars believe that the sport management field will continue to grow at a rapid pace for the foreseeable future (Costa, 2005; Jones et al., 2008; Mahoney et al., 2004; Parkhouse & Pitts, 2001; Weese, 2002), and the need for frequent assessment of the sport management field is necessary for its continued growth (Amis & Silk, 2005; Chalip, 2006; Cuneen & Parks, 1997).

To enhance status among peers and other academic fields, Costa (2005) noted that improvements to sport management programs infrastructure (e.g., peer-reviewed publication acceptance) would help attain increased status. The term infrastructure can be linked to the term credibility. However, the term credibility, in an academic setting, is an ambiguous term. In the sport management field, Parkhouse (1987) used the term “credibility” (p. 94) with regard to the future of the industry where meaningful concerns were expressed about the quality of the curricula. Boucher (1998) suggested that the sport management field’s credibility could be lost in academic circles through the selection of research problems being self-serving as opposed to having purposeful applications for practicing sport managers. This research uses the formal definition of credibility of which Pitts (2001) described as “quality, accountability, and credentials” (p. 7). While Pitts (2001) noted that areas in which to improve credibility lie among criteria such as guidelines, curriculum and accreditation, faculty preparation and qualifications, she goes on to designate other areas necessary to analyze credibility within academic fields. She notes that to “attain and sustain” (p. 7) credibility, its members must measure its merit in several areas most notably through scholarly associations, the industry literature and conferences. This research begins to fill the gap previous scholars may have missed by reviewing the progress towards credibility through full-time faculty peer-reviewed journal publications, conference presentations and research interests.

The current research analyzed each sport management undergraduate and graduate programs listed on the NASSM website. At the time of abstract submission, there were a total of 438 programs. A hyper-link was associated with each institution that provided a connection to the institutions sport management program. To be consistent with Pitt’s (2001) definition of credibility, primary data focused on the collection of variables attributed to peer-reviewed
publications, conference presentations and research interests. For organizational purposes, Microsoft Excel was used to collect each listed full-time faculty member, their peer-reviewed publication and regional, national and international conference presentations, if any. Multiple references to peer-reviewed publications and conference presentations were only counted as one publication and conference presentation. Microsoft Word was used to collect faculty members’ research interests information. Three separate NVivo software program templates were used for each variable and analyzed. The benefit of the NVivo program lies in its ability to interpret text, while systematically identifying themes from the data (Campbell, 1975; Yin, 1994).

Results indicated two major themes that may prove beneficial toward the enhancement of the sport management field’s credibility. First, the results from peer-reviewed publications and research interests are primarily focused on sport and recreation journals. This theme of peer-reviewed publications and research interests primarily focusing on sport is also confirmed by conference presentations predominately being presented at sport management themed conferences such as the NASSM conference and the College Sport Research Institute conference. This proves problematic towards enhancing the credibility of the sport management field. Costa (2005) and Slack (1991, 1996) suggested that to improve the credibility of the sport management field, a broadening of the locations were members of the field publish and present work is critical. Previous research to improve credibility took the form of increased interdisciplinary research (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2012; Slack 1991; Watson, 1994), but the results of this study suggest that the path of interdisciplinary research is less than desirable. Amis and Silk (2005), Doherty (2012) and Slack (1991, 1996) indicated the application of sport should be through all industries, not simply sport alone. “…aid the power of those in the academy to [conduct and] apply research so that it impacts, and is meaningful to the various communities that sport management has the potential to touch” (Amis and Silk, 2005, p. 355).

The second and unexpected major theme that emerged from the data analysis process was that many sport management programs were on the edge of actually being a sport management program. Parkhouse (1987) noted that to be a verified sport management program it must offer sufficient curriculum to merit a minor or concentration. While the data did not collect curriculum information about these programs, results often showed ‘no dedicated full-time faculty member’ associated with the program. Similarly, detailed information about the sport management program while highlighting sport management faculty had no link to information about the faculty in question.

This research is timely as results indicate inconsistencies between what Pitts (2001) is suggesting is needed for credible program and sport management field, and what sport management scholars are achieving in the field. It should be strongly noted that by no means should the accomplishments that sport management practitioners and researchers have achieved to this point be degraded. In fact, it could be argued that these accomplishments can be compared to the fields of business or political science. As Amis and Silk (2005), Doherty (2012) and Slack (1991) signified, the window of opportunity to further our sport management applications and research to simply a sport context is getting smaller and collaborating with faculty in other fields enhances our opportunities, which in turn, may enhance our credibility.

Recommendations for credibility enhancement opportunities is to actively seek out other scholars in areas such as political science or religion within our universities to collaborate efforts for broader societal impacts rather than specific sport impacts. Furthermore, the possibility of partnering with other organizations may be necessary. The Administrative Sciences Association of Canada (ASAC) has a Tourism and Sport Management division. This division is among other divisions such as social responsibility, entrepreneurship and family business and accounting to name a few (ASAC, 2013). While it can be argued that this is considered a management model and one that sport management is a part of, it is the principle of collaboration and interdisciplinary research (Doherty, 2012) that furthers the sport management field towards greater credibility.