Since the 1960s, sport management programs in the United States have witnessed substantial growth and increased popularity due to enormous student interest (Jones, Brooks & Mak, 2008). Jones et al. suggested that the evolution of sport management programs in the United States has moved from the physical education model to a more business oriented model. The move to a more business model approach can be seen in the tremendous growth and expansion of graduate programs in recent years. According to NASSM (2015), sport management master's programs are now offered in over 220 U.S. and over 40 international institutions. With the growth of sport management programs, specifically at the master's level, more scrutiny is being paid to the overall structure of the programs and the curriculum being used within these programs. The need to examine curricular and program requirements on a global scale, as well as understanding the similarities and differences between master's programs takes on greater meaning.

In an attempt to study sport management master’s programs and curriculum, the researchers examined programs at 4-year institutions. The purpose of this study was to: (1) provide an overview of the graduate programs within sport management, specifically master’s programs; (2) provide a snapshot of sport management master’s programs based on COSMA accreditation and the Common Professional Component (CPC); and (3) compare U.S. and international master’s programs and curriculum.

The researchers first started by collecting primary data from school websites over a six month period (January 2015 - May 2015). All master’s programs from the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia listed on the NASSM website were identified and analyzed. Some international programs were not analyzed due to the lack of information available on the web.

To ensure validity and reliability of the data and the data collection process, both researchers coded data individually and then collaborated and revisited the information together to verify and edit any discrepancies. Program information was collected along with the Common Professional Component (CPC) recommended by COSMA. Researchers coded the number of required courses for each CPC content area and other courses required but not in the CPC. In addition, if a program required a research methods or statistics course, it was coded in one category. Elective courses were not coded as they varied drastically from program to program. After following the systematic coding procedures, the data set consisted of 194 usable programs for the U.S. and 24 usable programs internationally (Canada- 5, Europe- 15, Australia- 4) for a total N of 218.

Results varied and ultimately showed that program and curricular standards were very different throughout all regions, indicating that sport management master’s programs do not necessarily follow a specific program model. In the U.S., a typical master’s degree in sport management was on-ground, consisted of 35 credits, was titled Masters of Science, and the program was not accredited. The top three courses offered in relation to the CPC content areas were legal issues, integrative experiences, and marketing & communication. Internationally, a typical master’s degree program was offered on-ground, consisted of an average of 34 credit hours, and were more likely to use sport specific degree titles (i.e. Master’s in Sports Business Management). Additionally, no international programs were COSMA accredited, unlike 15% of programs in the U.S. Different from the U.S., the top three courses offered in relation to the CPC content areas at international master’s programs were management, marketing & communication, and finance/accounting/economics.

The results of the current examination of sport management master’s programs indicate that there is not a common core of classes students take in the U.S., or internationally, that provide uniformity among programs. While flexibility within curriculum, especially at the graduate level, provides advantages to the program and the student, the legitimacy of the knowledge and experienced gained can come into question. These findings can ultimately help sport management industry professionals understand the curricular requirements of graduates, who could be
potential hires, as well as help potential students understand what the programs have to offer in relation to curriculum and program locations. Students can then use this information to help them choose the most appropriate program for their career goals. In addition, these findings can help sport management program administrators and educators learn about current curriculum models of other sport management master’s programs, which they can use for the planning and implementation of curriculum or for identifying topics that might differentiate their program from others.