Perceived Barriers and Sources of Support for Undergraduate Female Students’ Persistence in the Sport Management Major

Molly Hayes Sauder, York College of Pennsylvania  
Michael Mudrick, York College of Pennsylvania  
Jaime R. DeLuca, Towson University

Introduction & Literature Review
Historically, sport has been considered a male-dominant entity (Messner, 2012), from a participation standpoint (Schell & Rodriguez, 2010) to its hierarchical power structure (Welty, Peachey, & Burton, 2011), along with its media coverage (Cooky, Messner, & Hextrom, 2013). Within this context, women are faced with barriers that suppress advancement in sport based on sex (Cooky & LaVoi, 2012). This theme is particularly salient within sport industry careers. Much research has found underrepresentation of women employed in the sport industry (e.g. Lapchick, 2014), and in one study, 25% of female sport management graduates believed that “being a woman had hindered their career” (Leberman & Shaw, 2015, p. 358). An emerging body of research suggests that career-related barriers materialize early for females interested in a career in sport.

Male undergraduate students in sport management majors greatly outnumber females (Jones, Brooks, & Mak, 2008), contributing to the perception that this career path is male dominated and that gender stereotypes are legitimate barriers (Harris, Grappendorf, Verado, & Aicher, 2014; Harris, Grappendorf, Aicher, & Veraldo, 2015). Being a female in an academic program dominated by male students has been described as “challenging,” “stressful,” “hard,” and/or “frustrating” (Harris et al., 2014, p. 39). Undergraduate female sport management majors feel that they must work harder to prove themselves, believe that they face greater difficulty networking, and anticipate problems with long hours and low salaries in relation to aspirations of marriage and children (Harris et al., 2015). Cuneen and Sidwell’s (2007) study of internships within Division I athletics showed several barriers to female students’ career advancement, as male students were more likely to work full-time, receive pay, and be supervised by a male administrator while female interns were more likely to be involved in clerical duties.

Concerns regarding gender bias exist in other male-dominant academic areas, such as the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. Numerous studies have been conducted in this area, showing gender issues arising from multiple areas of the academic experience. For example, males perceive greater support for continuing in the field (Hardin & Longhurst, 2015), are regarded as having greater knowledge of course content due to fellow male peers overestimating their expertise (Grunspan et al., 2016), and are given favorable bias from instructors (Hofer, 2015).

Ultimately, the aforementioned research underscores the point that there are continuing challenges for female students in fields regarded as male-dominated, such as sport management. Learning more about this phenomenon within sport is a particularly critical area of inquiry because of the size and importance of the sport sector of the economy (Leberman & Shaw, 2015). Previous work has explored female sport management majors’ entrance into the degree, observations of classroom climate, interest in postgraduate studies, and perceived career barriers (Harris et al., 2014, 2015). However, there is a need to more fully understand the holistic complexity of the entire academic experience, including perceived sources of support that encourage persistence in the sport management major. Accordingly, the purpose of this present study is to better understand both the barriers and sources of support that female sport management students perceive while engaged in their undergraduate studies.

Methodology
Qualitative methods will be used with the specific intent of illustrating how individuals internalize and expound upon their experiences and surroundings (Merriam, 2009). Female and male undergraduate sport management students will be recruited from two mid-Atlantic institutions, and asked to complete questionnaires and take part in recorded
focus group interviews. The inclusion of male focus groups in the research is important, as it was directly called for in prior research (Harris et al., 2014, 2015) and serves to illuminate what may be shared experiences of all undergraduate sport management majors and what may be unique to the experience of females. Ideally, data will be collected from a total of 60 participants. Focus groups were chosen as the data collection method due to their ability to unearth “group members’ thinking on a research topic” (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003, p. 309) by allowing for conversation where ideas build off each other. All sessions will be transcribed and analyzed utilizing qualitative coding procedures.

Data collection has begun. Specifically, focus group sessions have been conducted at one of the two institutions involved in this study; the focus groups at the second institution will commence during the month of November. We anticipate presenting results centering on themes related to (a) major choice, career aspirations, and personal goals; (b) support from others in relation to the selection of the sport management major; (c) level of comfort and acceptance within the sport management major including classroom experiences, experiential learning and co-curricular endeavors, peer interactions, and faculty behavior; (d) perception of gender barriers and sources of support within the major and future career trajectory.

Implications & Contribution to Sport Management
This study is important as it represents a step towards better understanding the comprehensive lived experience of gender bias among women in the sport management major. There is a dearth of research on female sport management students’ experiences while enrolled in higher education and during their subsequent career progression (Leberman & Shaw, 2015). The information gleaned from this work could allow educators to make curricular improvements that create a more inclusive, positive environment within sport management programs. Further, findings could facilitate enhanced gender equity practices that could ultimately diversify the sport industry’s workforce.