

# Is Sport Management Research Diverse? A Five-Year analysis of Dissertations

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## Introduction

Sport management as an academic discipline has experienced tremendous growth in the last 15-20 years with the present number of universities offering some academic study of sport management exceeding 200 (Parkhouse & Pitts, 2005). However, the number of qualified faculty members available to teach in these programs has not kept up with the growth of the programs (Mahony, Mondello, Hums & Judd, 2004). Mahony and colleagues found, on average, 70 faculty positions are advertised each year seeking sport management expertise but only 15 new doctoral graduates enter the marketplace each year. This underproduction of qualified faculty, during a time of growth in the programs, raises questions about the potential to advance research in the discipline forward.

Sport management researchers have occasionally critiqued the scope and direction of research in their field. These scholars generally question the lack of diversity in settings in which the re-

search takes place (e.g. Paton, 1987, Pitts, 2001); the lack of diversity in subjects (e.g. Olafson, 1990); the lack of diversity in methodology (e.g. Slack, 1996); and the lack of diversity in topic areas (e.g. Slack, 1998). When attempting to define the scope of sport management, the Sport Management Program Review Council (SMPRC) standards provide a contextual guide. SMPRC standards identify minimum content areas specific to undergraduate, masters and doctoral programs necessary for university programs to receive approval. While the SMPRC standards allow room for variance among programs based on their individual strengths, core content areas remain consistent.

However, the question remains whether the SMPRC standards are representative of the research in the field, or whether research continues to be narrow in terms of content areas and settings. The purpose of this study is to examine the diversity of recent doctoral dissertation topics in sport management. The findings of this study will determine

if recent doctoral graduates in the field are heeding the calls for more diverse research or if graduates are merely expanding the existing body of research. The implications of this study may offer some insight into whether sport management doctoral students are creating new methods of studying the field, thereby expanding the academic discipline, or whether sport management research is mired in repeating the same research areas of emphasis.

### Previous Research

Paton (1987) initiated the discussion about sport management research in the debut issue of the *Journal of Sport Management* when he identified two future challenges for sport management research. The first challenge concerned the type of research warned that while a theoretical base is necessary, the research must be "sensible and useful" (p. 30). The second challenge related to the focus of the research, warning that more attention needed to be directed toward increasingly diverse organizations. Pitts (2001) discussed the lack of contextual diversity in research, pointing out the heavy emphasis on college athletics and a few professional sports.

Olafson (1990) also noted deficiencies in both the methods and analyses in sport management research as compared with organizational studies in the business literature, emphasizing the heavy use of survey methods in sport management. Olafson (1990) also highlighted the homogeneity of selected subjects and settings in this research,

noting that 94% used individuals and 87% used the public sector.

Slack (1996) called for research in sport management to be broadened in order to move the field forward and identified organizational strategy, technology and politics as areas of possible expansion. Later, Slack (1998) openly questioned whether there was anything unique about sport management, lamenting the restriction of research to a "narrow range of organizations and an equally narrow range of management topics" (p. 24).

Recently Costa (2005) conducted a Delphi study of expert sport management researchers. She concluded a lack of consensus among the experts as to the diversity of research in sport management, indicating no resolution to Paton's (1987) and Olafson's (1990) concerns about broadening research. Costa (2005) stated, "What we address determines whom we do and do not serve, as well as what we seek to achieve. The question, then, is whether we conceive ourselves as broadly relevant or narrowly so" (p. 133).

Current SMPRC standards identify nine undergraduate content areas: socio-cultural dimensions in sport; management and leadership in sport; ethics in sport management; marketing in sport; communication in sport; budget and finance in sport; legal aspects of sport; economics in sport; and governance in sport. Eight masters content areas are necessary for program approval: socio-cultural context of sport; management and leadership in sport; ethics in sport management; marketing

in sport; public relations in sport; financial management in sport; legal aspects of sport and research in sport. SMPRC further identified 10 areas of specialization for sport management theory in a doctoral program: sport marketing; organizational theory in sport; sport governance; sport finance; sport venue and event management; sport public relations; sport law; sport economics; human resource management in sport; and other (Sport Management Program Review Council, 2000).

It is unclear whether the diversity of specializations in sport management research actually exists. For example, a cursory review of research in sport management would seem to suggest a heavy emphasis on some areas (e.g. sport marketing), with little attention paid to other areas.

Soucie and Doherty (1996) conducted the first quantitative study to examine doctoral dissertations in sport management. Their inductive analysis of dissertation abstracts from 1949-1993 ( $N = 582$ ) found 17 percent focused on administrative practices, policies and procedures in sport management, 14 percent analyzed career patterns and competencies of sport administrators and 13 percent each focused on current sport management academic programs and leadership traits of sport administrators. Together, those four areas accounted for 57 percent of all sport management dissertations.

Barber, Parkhouse and Tedrick (2001) found similar results in their review of topics published in the *Journal of Sport Management* from 1991-1995. The

authors observed four content areas (personal management, curriculum, organizational structure and gender/race issues) accounted for two-thirds of all published articles.

As the quantity of sport management research and the number of programs offering sport management degrees has increased during the last 15-20 years, the question of faculty quality comes into play. Do enough qualified faculty members exist to effectively instruct students in the growing diversity of sport management research?

Mahony and Pitts (1998) noted the adoption of the NASPE-NASSM Sport Management Program Standards (SMPRC) in 1993 was a significant step toward developing a "minimum body of knowledge necessary for a quality sport management curriculum" (p.261). These authors observed the standard regarding a minimum number of program faculty has led to more specialized faculty in sport management to the point that faculty "can completely ignore certain content areas" (p. 262). This raises the question regarding what happens if the majority of new faculty members focus on the same area of research. Who will become the experts on those areas which are ignored? How will programs justify meeting the SMPRC standards if their faculty are limited in knowledge of those areas?

Because identifying a research focus is a critical element in most doctoral programs and the dissertation often indicates the research focus of the doctoral graduate, an examination of dissertation topics would be very useful in

determining the breadth of research in the field. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine if sport management doctoral programs are preparing future members of the professoriate by producing graduates with diverse research interests identified in the SMPRC guidelines. This article builds on Soucie and Doherty's (1996) inductive analysis of doctoral dissertations published between 1949-1993, but differs because the present study attempts to compare selected dissertation topics to SMPRC standards.

### **Methodology**

The researchers identified 17 North American universities with doctoral programs in sport management. Previous research on doctoral programs by Mahony, Mondello, Hums and Judd (2004), which was based on lists identified by NASSM and Stier (2001), guided the identification of universities. An examination of the doctoral program listings on the NASSM website in September 2004 augmented the list.

The researchers conducted electronic searches in September and October 2004 of the Digital Dissertations database to obtain dissertation titles. Separate searches were conducted for dissertations completed at each of the 17 institutions by keyword "sport" and "athletics." Each university's corresponding list was emailed to the institution's doctoral program director for verification. Fourteen of the 17 universities responded to the request and a final comprehensive list of dissertations was as-

sembled ( $N = 144$ ) which included all 17 institutions. Further database searches were conducted for the three nonresponding institutions as a means of insuring a complete list of completed dissertations. The number of dissertations ( $n = 15$ ) completed at these schools represented slightly more than 10% of the overall population.

Dissertation titles were entered into a master spreadsheet and sorted into alphabetical order. No additional information such as institution or author's name was included. Four researchers from different universities working independently coded each of the 144 dissertations into one of the 10 SMPRC doctoral program areas of specialization.

A potential limitation of the coding process was the possibility that certain dissertations might overlap into multiple content areas. For example, a dissertation which examined satisfaction aspects of visitors at a specific sport event might be coded as event management or marketing. After the initial coding, only 20 dissertations had no clear consensus, creating an interrater reliability of 86.1%, within the reliability guidelines of at least 70% advised by Borg and Gall (1983). Through consultation of dissertation abstracts, additional information was acquired to help code the remaining 20 dissertations.

Dissertations in the "other" category were further classified into four specialty areas: other-sociology; other-academic programs; other-health; and other-psychology. The division of the other category into four specialties created 13

possible content areas in which a dissertation was coded.

## Results

All 13 of the possible content areas had at least two dissertations coded except for Sport Economics which did not have any dissertations. Most (75.7%) of the dissertations completed between 1999 and 2003 were coded into one of four content areas: sport marketing, human resource management in sport, other-sociology and organizational theory in Sport. Table 1 shows a detailed breakdown of the dissertation frequencies by SMPRC content standard.

Two separate chi square analyses were run to determine statistical signifi-

cance. The first analysis showed a significant difference [ $\chi^2 = 122$ ;  $df = 8$ ;  $p < .001$ ] between the number of dissertations completed and the nine main SMPRC standards. This result indicates there is not an even split of dissertation topics among the SMPRC standards. Dissertations coded "other" were excluded from this analysis as the intent in the analysis was to focus on existing SMPRC standards and current research.

The second analysis showed a significant difference [ $\chi^2 = 20.47$ ;  $df = 11$ ;  $p < .05$ ] between gender and the 12 content areas (sport economics was excluded from this analysis as there were no dissertations found in that content area). Males accounted for 61% of disserta-

Table 1  
Dissertation Content Area Frequencies by Gender (N=144)

Content Area	Male	Female	Unknown	Total
Sport Marketing	27	7	4	38 (26.39%)
Human Resource Management in Sport	13	13	3	29 (20.14%)
Other-Sociology	10	15	0	25 (17.35%)
Organizational Theory in Sport	8	7	2	17 (11.81%)
Other-Academic Programs	6	2	0	8 (5.56%)
Sport Governance	3	3	0	6 (4.17%)
Sport Finance	6	0	0	6 (4.17%)
Sport Law	2	2	0	4 (2.78%)
Sport Venue and Event Management	2	0	1	3 (2.08%)
Sport Public Relations	3	0	0	3 (2.08%)
Other-Health	1	2	0	3 (2.08%)
Other-Psychology	1	1	0	2 (1.39%)
Sport Economics	0	0	0	0 (0.00%)
TOTAL	82	52	10	144

Note: 10 dissertations without identifiable gender were considered missing data.

tions completed during the period and were much more inclined to pursue dissertation content in business related areas such as sport marketing (27 males, seven females) and sport finance (six males, zero females). Males also outnumbered women in dissertations completed in other-academic programs (six males, two females). Females outnumbered males in the other-sociology content area (15 females, 10 males). Remaining content areas were almost evenly distributed by gender. Dissertations coded "other" were included in this

analysis to gain a greater understanding of research interests by gender. Table 1 shows a detailed breakdown of dissertation frequencies by gender.

Dissertation frequencies by university were tabulated, though no chi square analysis was run due to the number of empty cells. Table 2 presents a detailed breakdown of the four most frequent dissertation content areas (sport marketing, human resource management in sport, other-sociology, and organizational theory in sport) by university.

Table 2  
Most Frequent Dissertation Content Areas by Institution (N=144)

	Mktg	HRM	Soc	OT	Other Areas	Univ Total
University A	0	0	0	3	1	4
University B	0	0	0	1	0	1
University C	4	3	0	1	0	8
University D	4	5	5	3	7	24
University E	2	0	1	0	1	4
University F	1	1	0	0	1	3
University G	1	0	4	0	1	6
University H	4	0	2	0	0	6
University I	1	1	2	0	4	8
University J	2	0	2	1	2	7
University K	6	2	1	4	4	17
University L	7	7	3	2	2	21
University M	0	1	1	1	1	4
University N	0	1	0	0	0	1
University O	0	2	0	0	1	3
University P	6	6	4	1	9	26
University Q	0	0	0	0	1	1
TOTAL	38	29	25	17	35	144

Note: Mktg = Sport Marketing; HRM = Human Resource Management in Sport;

## Discussion and Implications

Several themes emerge from the results. First, it appears sport management dissertations are heavily focused in a few areas and a majority of the SMPRC content areas are not topical foci of recent dissertations. Of those heavily researched areas, one (other-sociology) is not specifically identified in the SMPRC doctoral program standards. In fact, six of the areas (governance, finance, law, venue and event management, public relations, and economics) accounted for less than 5% of the dissertations each. Similar to Soucie and Doherty (1996), there were few dissertations in many of the areas that have been defined as part of the sport management discipline. However, when compared to the prior study, the top four areas in the current study represent an even higher percentage of the dissertations (75.7% vs. 57%). This suggests a trend toward more clustering in a few areas, as opposed to increased expansion into new areas. In other words, the growth in sport management as a discipline may only be increasing the literature in a few of the areas, while others are not growing.

Second, sport marketing is clearly the dominant content area, serving as the focus of greater than one in four dissertations completed in the field. Moreover, this represents a major change when compared to past research (Barber et al., 2001; Soucie & Doherty, 1996), which did not identify sport marketing as one of the four major areas for research. This finding raises the question: Why

have other academic areas of sport management not grown at the rate of sport marketing? While Mahony and Pitts (1998) discussed the growth of research in sport marketing, they did not examine why this has occurred. While it is mere speculation at this point, there are some possibilities. It is possible that this may be related to the interests of some of the doctoral advisors at the doctoral programs. Since a student often chooses topics that are in their advisor's area of expertise, an increase in marketing focused advisors could have led to this shift. It is also possible that this has been influenced by the interest from new publication outlets in sport marketing (e.g., *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, *International Journal of Sport Marketing and Sponsorship*) and the formal establishment of the Sport Marketing Association and its annual conference in 2003. Another possibility is the availability of subjects to sample for research. It is relatively easy for an academic researcher to access consumers as they enter a stadium or arena to conduct marketing research. Finally, it may be related to the interest that practitioners have in sport marketing research.

Third, there has been a decline in focus on sport management curriculum and academic programs. Prior studies found that this was one of the four most common areas (Barber et al., 2001; Soucie & Doherty, 1996). Even among those classified as "other-academic programs," few were focused on sport management programs. At first glance, this is not a surprising result. As an academic field is in its infancy, it is logical

that people would focus attention on determining the appropriate curriculum for the programs. However, as there becomes more agreement on the “appropriate” curriculum, it is also logical that researchers would begin to focus on this topic less.

Fourth, there were a number of dissertations that did not fit well into any of the SMPRC standard areas. Most importantly, one of the areas, sociology, was among the three most popular areas. Sport sociology has often been seen as a unique discipline. Sport sociologists have their own journal (e.g., *Sociology of Sport Journal*) and own organization and conference (i.e., National American Society for Sport Sociology). However, despite the focus on sociology by many sport management doctoral students, sociology is not identified as an SMPRC specialization for doctoral students. However, it is listed as a content area in the undergraduate and graduate standards. This contradiction raises questions about the scope of sport management research, the expertise in sport management doctoral programs, and the future directions of the field. For example, it is difficult to argue that sport economics is part of the larger discipline of sport management if there is very little research there, while sport sociology is outside of the field when a large amount of research is done in this area.

Fifth, if we assume successful completion of a dissertation leads to being an “expert” in a given field, the current study raises some questions about where sport management programs are

finding “experts” to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in SMPRC content areas in which there low percentages of completed dissertations (i.e. public relations/communication, governance, economics, finance). While Weese (2002) and Mahony et al. (2004) primarily focused on the lack of qualified sport management faculty to fill the available positions, the findings in this study suggest the problems may be even greater. It is difficult enough given the supply and demand of faculty in this area to find sport management faculty in general, but if a university is also concerned with having people qualified to teach the different subject matters, a successful faculty search could be even more unlikely.

While we can merely speculate on how universities fill positions with qualified faculty, there do appear to be some possibilities for how faculty are identified. One, it is likely that many faculty are forced to develop more than one area of expertise in order to handle their teaching assignments. While some may only be asked to teach courses in one area (e.g., sport marketing), most will teach in multiple areas. While such a task may be manageable for faculty members asked to teach undergraduate courses outside their specialization, the task becomes significantly more challenging for courses at the graduate level. If the doctoral programs understand this issue and are preparing students accordingly, this problem may not be as big as it first appears. However, there are certainly questions about the capability of most people to become and



remain experts in multiple areas over their entire careers as faculty. This issue is particularly true when the areas are not similar (i.e., it is easier to be an expert in both finance and economics than in finance and public relations). Two, some programs may be finding expertise from individuals who are not coming from sport management doctoral programs. This solution is especially true for sport law, where many faculty may be trained in law schools.

Sixth, there were significant differences between men and women in topic areas of dissertations. Men were more likely to complete dissertations in marketing and finance, while women are more likely to complete dissertations in sociology. This difference has a number of implications for gender related issues in the field. For example, Mondello, Mahony, Hums and Moorman (2002) found that sport marketing was the most often sought area of expertise in advertised sport management faculty positions and finance was also common. In contrast, sociology was not among the most commonly identified areas. Men would appear to have a definite advantage in the sport management faculty job market.

Finally, a recent trend in sport management job openings has been a preference for expertise in sport finance. Pedersen, Fielding, and Yoh (2006) found the number of advertisements for finance increased from 20% of all announcements in 2002-03 to 32% in 2004-05. Only six of the dissertations were coded into finance, raising the question of how universities are finding

qualified faculty members to teach in this area. It may also mean that faculty members who have experience teaching sport finance are at a competitive advantage in the faculty job market.

### **Future Research and Conclusion**

Future research should examine other aspects of the dissertations to determine the level of diversity in settings, subjects and methodology. Future research could also examine the articles published. While the study could replicate the work of Barber et al. (2001), it would appear logical at this point to expand beyond the *Journal of Sport Management*. There has been a large growth in the available publication outlets for faculty in sport management and a future study should attempt to include all of those journals in the analysis.

Costa (2005) proposed what sport management academicians address indicates whom they do and do not serve. The current study raises some questions about the field of sport management and its current development. By Costa's definition, is the scope of sport management to serve marketers, human resource managers and sociologists? If other areas are not the focus of dissertations, is expertise being developed in other ways (e.g., doctoral program education, multiple research foci for faculty)? Is the development of research in the field flourishing in some areas while languishing in other areas? Is it really possible for a field with so few faculty in North America (Mahony et al., 2004) to fully develop research in ten or

more areas? In other words, is developing strong lines of research in a limited number of areas better for the field than being spread too thin by trying to cover all possibilities? What could or should those of us in the field do differently? Sport management as an academic discipline is still very young, but leaders in the field need to continually assess its development and develop strategies for its long term development.

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