

## Career Paths in Sport Management

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### Abstract

Sport management alumni ( $N=268$ ) from five universities that offer undergraduate programs with an emphasis in sport management within departments of parks, recreation, and tourism were sampled via an electronic survey. The survey sought to learn where alumni were working, and how they felt about their career choice and undergraduate professional preparation. Participants were also asked about what curricular changes they would recommend, their view of sport in North America, and their view of the relationship between sport and recreation. Of the respondents, 63% found work in sport-related fields after graduation, although only 39% of those remained in sport-related positions at the time of the study. Low salaries and limited job opportunities were the main reasons given for leaving the field. However, many respondents indicated their entry-level work experience provided them an opportunity to move into more lucrative careers outside sport. Curricular implications, such as the need for core competencies, conclude the paper.

**Keywords:** *business; careers; recreation; sport management*

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A recent study focused on choosing sport management as a college major was published in *Schole* (Schwab, Dustin, Legg, Timmerman, Wells, & Arthur-Banning, 2013). The purpose of that study was to better understand undergraduate sport management students who were enrolled in programs housed in departments of parks, recreation, and tourism. Fueling the study was a concern for the appropriate balance between the curricular needs of sport management students and those of traditional park, recreation, and tourism students, and the fit between sport management students and park, recreation, and tourism faculty (Chalip, 2009; Dustin & Schwab, 2008a, 2008b; Edwards & Peachy, 2010).

In the 2013 study, the authors found that sport management students were predominantly male (70%) and identified strongly with sport due to their earlier sport-related life experiences. Those students discovered sport management as a major after enrolling in college and were driven in their career aspirations by a general love of sport more than an in-depth understanding of viable career opportunities. The research concluded by discussing advising, curricular, and employment implications. In particular, the study suggested programs ought to offer courses in business, public administration, and law so students would be prepared for a variety of careers, not just those in sport management (Schwab et al., 2013).

Several researchers have addressed what appears to be a dearth of promising careers in sport management (Branch, 2002; Edwards & Peachy, 2010; Gibson, 2008; Parkhouse & Pitts, 2005), especially careers with a focus on sport as entertainment (Weese, 2002). Given the increasing popularity of sport management as a college major (NASSM, 2012), it is reasonable to inquire about the number and quality of careers in the sport industry (i.e., professional and collegiate sport administrative positions), as well as how prepared sport management graduates are for the job market. It is incumbent on academic administrators, professors, and advisors to know what career opportunities are actually available for sport management students. It is also important for mentors to measure how prepared students are for entering the job market, and what, if anything, should be done differently to better meet sport management students' curricular needs.

To make those determinations, it was necessary to survey sport management alumni in the workforce to gain a more accurate assessment of the qualifications necessary to successfully perform their job functions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to build upon the 2013 research by examining by examining the career paths of sport management graduates from the same departments of parks, recreation, and tourism that were represented in the first study. Specifically, the researchers wanted to know which areas of sport management alumni were working in, the nature of their work, and how satisfied they were with their chosen career path. In addition, respondents were asked how well their undergraduate education prepared them for a career in sport and what recommendations, if any, they had for a curriculum in sport management. Lastly, the subjects were questioned about the role of sport in American society and the relationship between sport and recreation.

## Method

To answer these questions, the researchers developed a 22-item questionnaire. Included were closed and open-ended questions asking respondents about their employment and perceptions of their level of professional preparedness received from their undergraduate curriculum (see Table 1). This exploratory survey was refined by a panel of experts with

**Table 1***Selected Questions from the Career Paths in Sport Management Questionnaire*

Why do you think you are not in the job you had anticipated? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Took another job that was offered me</li> <li>Very competitive field with few jobs</li> <li>Not many jobs where I want to live</li> <li>Did not have enough assistance from my University in finding the job I wanted</li> <li>Had unrealistic expectations about career opportunities</li> <li>Not enough contact with those in the field</li> <li>Insufficient Pay</li> <li>Grad School</li> <li>Poor Economy</li> <li>Other, please specify</li> </ul>
In what area of sport management do you currently work?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Account Manager</li> <li>Coaching</li> <li>Community Recreation</li> <li>Director/Assistant Director of Sport Operations</li> <li>Equipment Manager</li> <li>Game Operations</li> <li>Graduate School</li> <li>Legal</li> <li>Marketing</li> <li>Membership Services/Customer Service</li> <li>Program Coordinator or Assistant Program Coordinator</li> <li>Public Relations</li> <li>Compliance Coordinator</li> <li>Other, please specify</li> </ul>
Do you think what you studied in college prepared you to be successful in sport management?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Yes</li> <li>No</li> </ul>
If YES, what specific courses or experiences prepared you for success in this field? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>General sport management experience</li> <li>Business courses</li> <li>Increased familiarity with planning, marketing, and event production</li> <li>Outside activities, practical experiences, and internship</li> <li>Recreation programming</li> <li>Electronic marketing</li> <li>Other, please specify</li> </ul>
If NO, why not? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Courses did not cover topics in sport management</li> <li>Not enough courses in business-related topics</li> <li>Too much about general parks, recreation, and tourism</li> <li>Need finance and/or marketing courses</li> <li>Courses did not prepare me for what I am actually doing</li> </ul>
Based on your professional experience, what additional coursework would you recommend to help prepare undergraduate students for a career in sport management? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Marketing courses</li> <li>Finance/Accounting courses</li> <li>Communication courses</li> <li>Management courses</li> <li>Special event/game operations courses</li> <li>Law/legal aspects of sport course</li> <li>Classes specifically related to sport management</li> <li>Additional internship/out of class opportunities</li> <li>Graphics (i.e. Photoshop,) and web design courses</li> <li>Assistance finding courses in other departments that may relate to work in the field</li> <li>Information on jobs in the field</li> <li>Information on searching for jobs in sport management and related fields</li> <li>Other, please specify</li> </ul>
What other skills (non-coursework) would you recommend to help prepare undergraduate students for a career in sport management? (select all that apply)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Onsite visits and interaction with professionals in the field</li> <li>Volunteer opportunities in sport management</li> <li>Internship opportunities</li> <li>Public speaking skills</li> <li>Writing skills</li> <li>Ability to network and make contacts in the field</li> <li>How to be professional, presentable, confident</li> <li>Other, please specify</li> </ul>

experience working and teaching in the field of sport management. The research team conducted a pilot study among a small sample of undergraduate students at the researchers' universities. After reviewing the pilot study data, several survey questions were revised for clarity, multiple choice options were added, and an "other" option was provided so individuals could write in a response if the option that best fit them was not listed.

The questionnaire was sent electronically to contacts at five universities that offer an emphasis in sport management within a department of parks, recreation, and tourism (Clemson University [ $N=111$ ], Florida International University [ $N=48$ ], North Carolina State University [ $N=53$ ], the University of Illinois [ $N=34$ ], and the University of Utah [ $N=22$ ]). These five universities were determined by the researchers to be a representative sample of population of schools offering sport management as part of an undergraduate degree program in departments of parks, recreation, and tourism.

The Tailored Design Method (TDM) was employed to ensure a systematic approach for launching and collecting results from this online survey (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). The TDM is considered the standard for electronic survey data collection in the social sciences. Employing the TDM is intended to help increase response rates as well as eliminate the most common sources of error in survey research. After establishing contacts at the five participating universities, an e-mail was sent to each contact describing the need for and purpose of the survey. The contacts, in turn, forwarded the advance notice to all of their sport management alumni using email addresses provided by their respective institutions. One week later, the same procedure was followed and the researchers sent an electronic cover letter and the survey link to the same email addresses. Two weeks after, a follow-up e-mail was sent thanking the alumni who responded and requesting responses from all others who had yet to respond. An additional two weeks later, a final thank-you and reminder e-mail was sent. The online survey was open for six weeks in order to provide ample time for alumni to respond. Survey completion was voluntary and no prizes or compensation were offered. Respondents were assured anonymity and were told they could obtain the survey results if they wanted to review them. A total of 268 surveys were completed by alumni across the five participating universities. As the initial university contacts were unable to track the number of alumni who received the email, a response rate is not reported.

## Results

For reporting and discussion purposes, the researchers grouped the responses to the 22 questions into four themes: Employment Status, Professional Preparation, Career Satisfaction, and Sport in Society. The respondents were 62% male, 38% female, and 20% reported being former varsity athletes.

To determine if the particular university a graduate attended was a primary factor in the results, the researchers first tested for differences across the five universities on the four themes. A Pearson-Chi Square test revealed no significant differences among respondents from the five universities in answering the survey questions (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Summary of Differences Across Universities on Four Major Variables*

Variable	$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
Believed college prepared them to be successful	8.88	.114
General Satisfaction	5.12	.402
General Dissatisfaction	5.28	.383
Role of Sport in Society	4.37	.498

**Employment Status**

The first six survey questions focused on the past and present employment statuses of the sport management alumni. Of the 268 total responses, 63% reported that they had, at some point since graduation, worked in sport management. However, of that 63%, 38% reported that they were no longer working in the field. The primary reasons given for leaving the field were low salaries and limited job opportunities. As Table 3 illustrates, the most common areas where sport management graduates currently work are: community recreation (21%), marketing (18%), other (17% [fundraising/development, video services/media/television, sport travel, etc.], and coaching (11%).

**Table 3***Top Five Areas of Employment for Sport Management Alumni Working in Sport*

Area Employed	% of respondents
Community Recreation	21% (N=22)
Marketing	18% (N=19)
Coaching	11% (N=12)
Program Coordinator/Assistant Program Coordinator	7% (N=7)
Director/Assistant Director of Sport Operations	7% (N=7)
Other (e.g., academics, accounting, development/fundraising, video services/media/television production, college athletics, sports travel company, facility management, field maintenance, fitness attendant, premium seating and events, sports agent)	17% (N=18)

For additional analysis, respondents were divided into three groups based on their employment history: alumni who currently worked in sport management (39%), alumni who formerly worked in sport management (24%), and alumni who had never worked in sport management (37%). This analysis allowed the researchers to look for possible differences among the three groups related to: professional preparation (questions 7-11), career satisfaction (questions 12-15), and views on sport in society (questions 16-19). Descriptive statistics and significant differences among the three groups follow.

### Professional Preparation

Questions 7-11 were designed to ascertain whether the sport management alumni believed their undergraduate professional preparation program had adequately readied them for a career in sport management. While 70% of all respondents said their college work did adequately prepare them for their career, only 55% of the “never worked in the field” alumni felt this way; 73% of the “formerly worked in the field” felt this way; and 84% of the “currently work in the field” alumni felt this way. These differences were statistically significant ( $\chi^2 [2] = 16.328, p < .001$ ). Given these significant associations, the professional preparation data were then analyzed separately for each group.

Among alumni who responded that their college courses *did not* adequately prepare them for a job in sport management, the most common response (59%) chosen was that courses focused too much on the themes of “general parks, recreation, and tourism.” Indeed, this was the most frequent response given by alumni across the three groups. The second most common response (51%) was “not enough courses on business-related topics.”

In contrast, those alumni who were currently working in the field and who felt adequately prepared for a career in sport management, attributed their level of preparation to “outside activities, practical experiences, and internships” (80%). This was also the most frequent answer given by former sport management employees (60%). However, alumni who had never worked in sport, but who still believed their college experience had sufficiently prepared them, credited business courses as being most beneficial for a future career in sport management (67%).

### Career Satisfaction

Questions 12-15 focused on career satisfaction. Consistent with the responses to the professional preparation questions, responses to these questions were also associated with the alumni’s career status. Once again, there was a significant difference among the groups in terms of career satisfaction ( $\chi^2 [2] = 82.116, p < .001$ ). As expected, individuals who currently worked in sport management were most likely (90%) to select at least one reason why they were satisfied with their careers. In this group, the most common reasons chosen for being satisfied with their careers were: passion for their job (69%) and their love of sports (69%).

Individuals who previously worked in sport management were somewhat less satisfied with their careers, with only 47% noting at least one reason for being satisfied. Because these individuals no longer worked in sport management, it was not surprising that they would report less satisfaction with their careers. Their reasoning was similar to the “currently employed” group, with passion for their job (52%) and their love of sports (45%) being selected most often as the sources of their satisfaction. It is also worth noting that only 6% of the “formerly worked in the field” group selected salary as a reason for being satisfied, suggesting at least one possible motive for leaving the field.

There was also a significant difference between the “currently working” and “formerly working” groups in the frequency of individuals who reported that they were not satisfied with their career in sport management ( $\chi^2 [2] = 14.320, p=.001$ ). Individuals currently working in sport management were less likely to give a reason for being dissatisfied with their career with 32% of this group selecting reasons for dissatisfaction. The most common reasons for being dissatisfied were: low salaries (59%) and a lack of job opportunities (41%). Conversely, individuals who formerly worked in sport management were substantially more likely to give a reason for not being satisfied with their career. Once again, however, it is interesting to note that their reasons for not being satisfied were similar to those respondents who currently worked in the field: 62% of dissatisfied respondents listed low salaries as a reason, followed by lack of job opportunities (49%).

### **Sport in Society**

The final set of questions (16-19) probed alumni’s views on the role of sport in North American society and the relationship, if any, between sport and recreation. Respondents in the three groups did not differ significantly in their responses to these questions ( $\chi^2 [2] = .785, p=.675$ ). Of all respondents, 55% felt that sport as participation was more important to American society than entertainment, while 43% felt that sport as entertainment was more important. When asked to choose among a variety of statements about the significance of sport in American life, 36% of the respondents said that “sport is a critical source of social and cultural identity;” 22% said “sport is primarily a business;” 18% said “sport is a great vehicle for youth development;” 12% said “sport is largely a diversion from life’s more serious side;” and 8% said “sport reflects the essence of what life is about.” Investigated further, 54% of the respondents felt that sport received about the right amount of emphasis in American society, 30% felt that sport received too much emphasis, and 12% felt that sport did not receive enough emphasis. Finally, when asked about the relationship between sport and recreation, 60% of the respondents said that “sport was a specialization within recreation,” 21% said “recreation was a specialization within sport, and 12% said sport and recreation were not related.”

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the career paths of sport management graduates whose programs were housed in departments of parks, recreation, and tourism in the United States. Specifically, the researchers wanted to know in which areas of sport management the alumni were working. The study questioned participants on the nature of their work and how satisfied they were with their chosen career path. Additionally, respondents were asked how well their undergraduate education prepared them for a career in sport and what recommendations they might have for curricular changes. Finally, investigators wanted to learn how they felt about the role of sport in American society, as well as the relationship between sport and recreation.

The same themes (employment status, professional preparation, career satisfaction, and sport in society) frame this discussion. While the present study does not shed new light on the fit between parks and recreation departments and students working toward a degree with an emphasis in sport management, it does provide insight into the educational needs of entry-level sport managers, and thus guidance for academic departments offering a degree or an emphasis in sport management.



## Employment Status

While many sport management alumni find employment in the field, the results of this study indicate that about a quarter (24%) of those same alumni either never found work in the field or eventually left the field. The main reasons given for leaving the field include its highly competitive nature and limited career options. Additionally, alumni also mentioned unrealistic career expectations and limited professional contacts as barriers to establishing a sustainable career path. Like many other fields, entry-level positions within sport or sport-related organizations are plentiful, but middle and upper administration or management jobs are fewer in number. With an increased number of students graduating with degrees in sport management from academic departments of parks, recreation, and tourism, as well as students from other degree programs wanting to work in the field, there is much competition for a limited number of jobs (Ross, Hoff, & Kroll, 2011). If students are not cognizant of the widening gap between the number of job seekers and the number of viable career opportunities, they may not have realistic expectations about career paths in sport management. These expectations may be eventually manifested in career dissatisfaction.

The claim that currently enrolled students have unrealistic expectations about career opportunities in sport management is supported in the review of literature. An earlier report by this study's authors (Schwab et al., 2013), and another by Chen, Adams-Blair, and Miller (2013), indicated that undergraduate students may hold too narrow a view of the sport management field and too narrow a view of available or desirable jobs. Therefore, unrealistic expectations about what type of job and salary they might secure upon graduation exist. To manage expectations, administrators and faculty members in departments offering a sport management curriculum should ensure that students understand both the range of careers available and the competitive nature of the field. Competition in the field stems from the high number of graduates entering the workforce and the low number of those leaving higher level positions or retiring. Coupled with the limited number of top positions with higher salaries and additional competition for jobs in popular locations, the expectations may turn into dissatisfaction. Chen et al. (2013) also recommend offering a wider variety of experiences for sport management students, emphasizing the expansion of diverse perspectives and global awareness.

Remove quote marks entirely. of the field in order to widen students' views of career possibilities and to foster realistic expectations regarding future careers. In addition, faculty should increase networking opportunities with alumni who work in the field as well as cultivating industry contacts in nearby cities. Increasing communication and networking with professionals in the field could provide students with a more realistic view of what to expect from the job market.

Finally, given the sport management field's highly competitive nature, faculty should continually reassess and refine their course offerings and fieldwork opportunities to make sure they are preparing students in a way that best guarantees their marketability. The results of this study indicate that this may be a particularly important consideration for departments of parks, recreation, and tourism, where alumni sometimes feel that their education was of too generalized a nature without sufficient preparation in the specifics of sport management.

## Professional Preparation

Overall, the alumni surveyed in this study indicated that additional coursework in business-related topics, as well as out of class experiences, would have been highly



beneficial for their career. Specifically, respondents suggested courses in marketing and finance/accounting. They also recommended opportunities to network and volunteer in their field of study, and to gain assistance with finding a quality internship. Some graduates also indicated that too much of their coursework focused on parks and recreation, and if they had to choose again which degree to pursue, they would likely choose something more business-related.

If academic departments of parks, recreation, and tourism are to continue serving sport management students, faculty should adhere to a set of core competencies as suggested by current sport management administrators and researchers. Several studies have endeavored to specify those core competencies. Much of the research stems from work done by Toh (1997), who built on earlier studies to create the Competencies of Sport Managers (COSM) instrument. In his research, factor analysis indicated a six-item model of competencies for recreational sport administrators which included governance, sport foundations, risk management, communication, budgeting, and computer skills. Several researchers have used the COSM to assess needed competencies in several sport management sub-specializations. For example, Barcelona and Ross (2004) used the COSM to examine competencies desired by sport management administrators in campus, public, and military recreation agencies. Using factor analysis, their research pinpointed management techniques, sport programming, business administration, and theoretical perspectives as the major competencies valued by those in the field.

No matter the department in which the sport management program is housed, professionals in the field are beginning to reach a consensus about the basic set of knowledge, skills, and abilities graduates should possess in order to succeed. Academic departments should seek out this important information from the field to use as a guideline for curriculum planning. Departments should also realize the need for locating internship opportunities that will better prepare students for future careers.

### **Career Satisfaction**

The results of this study also indicate that passion for the sport management field, and for sports in general, appears to play a very strong role in job satisfaction. This idea is supported in the literature, as Chen et al. (2013) reported that sport lovers often take sports jobs. Following one's bliss is a popular prescription for success in life. Even those sport management alumni in this study who left the field for other endeavors remained enthusiastic about sport. Indeed, many of them reported that while they took more lucrative positions outside of sport, their sport-related work experience helped them develop skills and abilities that made them attractive to other industries. It is very likely that sport management, like many other service industries, is a "young person's game." It requires considerable energy, flexibility, and a willingness to do whatever is necessary to get a foot in the door. Opportunities come to those who put in long hours at low wages, and who are willing to go where the work takes them. A love of sport and a passion for their work are great motivators to sustain them on their career path.

### **Sport in Society**

The results of this study also confirm what was learned about sport management students in Schwab et al.'s investigation (2013). Sport management professionals generally believe that sport as participation is more important to American society than sport as entertainment. Indeed, the plurality of sport management professionals in this study

reported working in the context of community recreation. At the same time, sport as entertainment is a more attractive career path for most sport management students and alumni. The variety of sport management careers reported by respondents indicates that graduates explore and accept positions in many areas in pursuit of their desired career in the sport industry. They understand the increasingly prominent role sport plays in American society and they want to be a part of it.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The lessons learned from this study reinforce the importance that academic departments of parks, recreation, and tourism must find the best fit within their curriculum if they are going to offer degrees with emphases in sport management. Additional research specifying the best curricular practices is warranted, including better serving the core sport management competencies identified by Toh (1997) and Barcelona and Ross (2004). A better understanding of the roles internships, professional networking, and other academic experiences play, could give sport management students a more realistic perspective on career opportunities.

### Conclusion

The increasing popularity of sport in American culture brings with it both an opportunity and an obligation to employ best practices in preparing future sport management professionals. The opportunity resides in the growing variety of career paths available within sport. As indicated by these results, these careers run the gamut from traditional recreational sport programming within the context of sport as participation, to media production within the context of sport as entertainment. The obligation resides in the question of how best to prepare college students to play key roles in sport management's unfolding future. Fully understanding the growing opportunity and accepting the obligation to create an academic environment that best serves the interests of students aspiring to a career in sport is the challenge. Academic departments of parks, recreation, and tourism that welcome these opportunities should also welcome the educational obligation that comes with it.

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