

## SPORT MANAGEMENT

# Sport Management: Who We Are and Where We Are Going



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## Abstract

*Due to the popularity of sport, the need to have sport management programs that properly train practitioners is justified. However, with 505 sport management bachelor's programs worldwide housed in various academic units, there is little consistency within the field of study. This study strives to explore the field of sport management and to better understand sport management faculty members' perceptions of the discipline. Grounded in Foucault's theory of discourse, this study had a total of 154 sport management faculty members worldwide participate. The data revealed a lack of consistency within the field regarding faculty members' perceptions of sport management. This study offers a vital first step in an empirical examination of a critical phenomenon in the sport management academy.*

According to the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM), there are 430 sport management programs housed in universities across the United States. Of these, 359 are undergraduate programs and 71 are graduate programs (master's, doctoral, or both; NASSM, 2018). Worldwide there are 505 sport management

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programs at the undergraduate level alone (Degrees in Sports, n.d.). The prevalence of sport management education programs within the setting of higher education has grown rapidly, with a 159% increase since 2003 (Jones et al., 2008; NASSM, 2018). The proliferation of these academic programs over the last few decades not only reflects the big business of sport but also the need for sport management scholars and practitioners who can articulate and advocate for sport's positioning on public agendas (Chalip, 2006). Furthermore, amplified sport access due to various media outlets has increased interest in sport-related careers (Schwab et al., 2013). Students, hoping to transform their enthusiasm for sport and recreation into viable career paths, have also fueled the exponential growth of sport management (Hancock & Greenwell, 2013). With educational programs firmly situated within academia (Jones et al., 2008), the establishment of a universal definition of sport management is essential for maintaining the public's trust and vital to ensuring the field's continued growth and maturation.

Across higher education, it is well accepted that definitions matter when it comes to articulating an academic discipline's core subject, central constructs, and unifying tenets (Palmer, 1998). Yet, from the perspective sport management educators, a universal definition of this emerging academic discipline and practice seems to remain elusive. This study, therefore, identifies continued maturation and viability of sport management; that is, what are sport management faculty members' perceptions of sport management as an academic discipline? Specifically, how do sport management faculty members define sport management? As our study confirms, the answer depends on whom you ask. This study seeks not to criticize the academy but rather to identify the need for the field to ignite conversation to further develop sport management as an academic discipline.

Ongoing critical engagement with the conceptual underpinnings of an emerging discipline's distinct perspective (and its unique contribution to society) is a useful and necessary mechanism for uncovering common values, beliefs, or taken-for-granted assumptions often embedded within disciplinary culture (Laliberte Rudman et al., 2008) and educational practice (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Appreciating how scholars in a particular field of study conceptualize

their discipline's core subject, articulate their unique perspectives, and organize curricular content is critical to the preservation and evolution of any discipline or field of study regardless of its stage of development (Hooper et al., 2015; Laliberte Rudman et al., 2008). Thus, we have undertaken this study for the purpose of focusing on these first two dimensions of sport management.

This study was informed by Foucault's (1971) theory of discourse, which is helpful for assessing the paradigms of reality and dissecting truth (Razack et al., 2015). Often what is viewed as true is taken for granted, hidden within power structures and dialogues that inform the foundations of practice, policy, and procedure (Foucault, 1971; Razack et al., 2015). Furthermore, what is viewed as true frequently underpins action and influences interpretations of what is right and wrong (Foucault, 1971; Razack et al., 2015). Because the historical origins of unexamined power dynamics "are not readily visible to the people involved in their (re)production" (Razack et al., 2015, p. 38), the lack of awareness of such invisible hands of influence can reinforce the status quo, enabling an endless cycle of repetition (Foucault, 1971). When left unexamined, statements of perceived truths can create divisions, boundaries, uncertainty, and unrest, leading to the classification of social constructs (Foucault, 1971; Razack et al., 2015).

Some of the disciplinary uncertainty alluded to in Foucault's (1971) theories is reflected in more recent sport management literature. For example, in his 2006 Ziegler Lecture, "Toward a Distinctive Sport Management Discipline," Chalip acknowledged the "malaise over sport management's place and future as an academic discipline" (p. 1). He highlighted sport management's theoretical shortcomings and general lack of critical scholarly inquiry. Other explorations have questioned the value and positioning of sport management within higher education (Stride et al., 2017) or have attempted to retrace the historical origins and contextual influences that have shaped sport management (Seifried, 2015). Chalip (2006, 1990) also examined the existential crises within the field and called for a recalibration of the discipline's values.

Most of the aforementioned documents were conceptual papers by well-regarded sport management academics. Still, there is a need to further appreciate basic definitions or conceptualizations of sport

management faculty respective to the direction of the field and its closest-related academic disciplines. In fact, to date, no scholars within this field of study have attempted to undertake a descriptive analysis of conceptualizations of sport management from the perspective of educators.

There has been much debate about the appropriate department in which to house a sport management program (Chalip, 2006; Danylchuk & Boucher, 2003; Fielding et al., 1991; Jones et al., 2008; Mahony, 2008; Zaharia et al., 2016). Schools of education, health, and business are popular units in which sport management programs exist (Jones et al., 2008; Mahony, 2008). Regardless of the program location, sport management appears to be deemed relevant simply based on the sheer number of programs in existence. However, trying to establish sport management within higher education is made increasingly difficult when scholars and individual programs differ based on research spectrum, curriculum, and their location in different colleges based within the university. Creating a more inclusive and universal definition for the field can help alleviate these concerns. For instance, Pitts and Stotler (2007) defined sport management as “the study and practice of all people, activities, businesses, or organizations involved in producing, facilitating, promoting or organizing any sport-related business or product” (p. 4). Based on this definition, scholars can infer the sport management industry is quite multidisciplinary. Pedersen and Thibault (2014) postulated that sport management is a “name given to many university-level academic programs that prepare students to assume position in the sport industry” (p. 8).

If all of the faculty who are teaching and researching within the discipline have different notions about the purpose and definition of the field, it becomes problematic for several reasons including the inability to articulate and promote our unique disciplinary perspective, inconsistent content being offered across programs, confusion about what the discipline is by potential students and professionals, and not being taken seriously by those in other disciplines. Thus, this study sought to understand how sport management scholars define the term “sport management.” Results of this study can spark a conversation and further assist in legitimizing the sport management discipline. Furthermore, if the stakeholders, specifically sport

management faculty members, fail to agree on what sport management specifically is, the future of the profession is in jeopardy.

## History of Sport Management

Seeds of sport management can be seen as far back as ancient Greece (Hall, 2003; Stokowski et al., 2018). However, sport management education within the realm of the university is a comparatively new occurrence (Stokowski et al., 2018). The need for a sport management academic discipline became evident in 1957 when Walter O'Malley, then owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers, posed the question of where one would go to find individuals capable of managing a variety of different sporting events (Mason et al., 1981). O'Malley's writing did not go unnoticed, and in 1966, Ohio University launched the first sport management graduate program (Parks et al., 2011). Biscayne College became the first institution to have an undergraduate sport administration program (Masteralexis et al., 2012). Gillentine (2012) described the years between 1967 and 1987 as the era of maturation for the field of sport management. This period was essential to not only growing the discipline but also developing prominent scholars and leaders in the field. The rapid increase in sport management programs was due to the efforts and initiatives of individual universities. Thus, each university created their own foci and areas of emphasis (NASPE-NASSM Joint Task Force on Sport Management Curriculum and Accreditation, 1993). Further, since the sport management programs were often housed in different departments or colleges within the university (i.e., college of education vs. college of business), it further exacerbated some of the differences and priorities of each program (Chalip, 2006; Danylchuk & Boucher, 2003; Fielding et al., 1991; Jones et al., 2008; Mahony, 2008; Zaharia et al., 2016).

Sport management programs can choose to be accredited by the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA). COSMA is the accrediting body of sport management, "whose purpose is to promote and recognize excellence in sport management education worldwide in colleges and universities at the baccalaureate and master's levels through specialized accreditation" (COSMA, 2015b, "Welcome to COSMA," para. 1). COSMA began in 2008 and replaced the former accrediting body, the Sport Management Program Review Council (COSMA, 2015a), after representatives

from NASSM and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) met to create a new accrediting body that represented perspectives from both organizations. The creation of COSMA was meant to unify the sport management discipline and ensure quality programs for students and industry professionals. Both the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (Yiamouyiannis et al., 2013) oversee COSMA's accreditation process. Although the accreditation process and standards further establish sport management as a recognized field of study, only 12% of sport management programs are certified by COSMA (2015a).

Additionally, Chalip (2006) discussed sport management as a distinctive field of study. Sport management espouses health, socialization, economic and community development, and identity in ways that are unique to the sport management field and work to achieve positive public outcomes (Chalip, 2006). Creating and using theory grounded in sport phenomena as separate from mainstream academic disciplines or finding relevancy in existing theory is essential in continuing to define sport management as a unique academic discipline (Chalip, 2006). As social, political, economic, and cultural concerns change, sport management research evolves with those changes (Chalip, 2006). Chalip (2006) found that this continued avenue of research in sport defines sport management as its own academic discipline.

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## **Purpose of This Study**

Galarionis et al. (2017) believed the sport industry to be one of the largest industries in the world, worth more than \$620 billion annually. As such, the need to have sport management programs that properly train practitioners is highly justified (Pedersen & Thibault, 2014; Pitts & Stotler, 2007). However, with more than 505

sport management undergraduate programs (Degrees in Sports, n.d.) worldwide (442 in the United States alone) preparing students to work in a multibillion-dollar industry, little consistency can be found regarding the home units of these programs at their institutions of origin, confirming the constant question surrounding our field: What is sport management?

## Method

### Data Collection

Utilizing the NASSM list of sport management programs worldwide, we visited every institutional website to obtain 1,200 email addresses of sport management faculty. Following Dillman et al.'s (2014) survey protocol, each participant received an introductory email containing a description of the study. Participants were asked to answer various demographic questions and to provide a brief answer to the research question "what is sport management?" To improve the response rate, we sent a follow-up email 2 weeks after the initial email. Data were collected over a 4-week period.

### Participants

A total of 154 sport management faculty members participated in the study, for a response rate of 12.83%. The mean age of the participants was 44.13 years ( $SD = 11.51$ ). The sample consisted of 66.9% males ( $n = 103$ ) and 33.1% females ( $n = 51$ ). A majority of the participants identified as White (80.7%;  $n = 124$ ), worked at public institutions (65.7%;  $n = 101$ ), and were employed within the United States (85%;  $n = 131$ ). Fifteen percent of the respondents ( $n = 23$ ) reported being employed in Canada, Asia, Europe, and Australia/New Zealand. Respondents' sport management programs appeared to be housed within various disciplines: 54 (34.9%) in colleges of education, 41 (26.5%) in colleges of business, and 59 (38.6%) in some other college academic unit.

### Data Analysis

To answer the research question, we identified themes based on the responses submitted to the short answer question. Due to the systematic and objective processes of describing and quantifying phenomena, we used qualitative content analysis to analyze and

interpret the data for meaning (Elo et al., 2014). The content analysis process included three main phases: preparation, or collecting suitable data for content analysis, making sense of the data, and selecting the unit of analysis; organization, or open coding, creating categories, and abstraction; and reporting, in which the content of the categories was described (Elo et al., 2014). Trustworthiness was established through the use of interrater reliability in which four proficient qualitative researchers sifted through the data and collectively decided on the final themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

To answer the question “what are sport management faculty members’ perceptions of sport management?” faculty were asked to elaborate as to how they define the field. As such, faculty members were asked to respond to the question “what is sport management?” Once the data were analyzed, three major themes appeared: business, management, and recreation. Overall, the responses varied greatly and illustrated a lack of a consensus of the field among its faculty.

### Business

The theme that garnered the most responses was business. “The business of sport,” stated by 15 respondents (9.74%), was the most common and only uniform definition provided by faculty members. Furthermore, of the respondents, 52 (33.77%) defined sport management as some form of business. Not all of the participants operationally defined what they meant by “business,” but some went into great detail about it. One participant stated that sport management is a “combination of skills related to planning, directing, budgeting, leading, and evaluating sport-related activities.” This participant went on to say that for faculty members it involved “teaching the business and administrative theories and practices of the sport environment.” Another respondent gave an equally specific definition of sport management:

I define sport management as the effective and efficient process of coordinating financial, physical, human, and organizational resources to achieve predetermined objectives established by an institution or organization toward the

creation and presentation of quality products and services for the sport industry.

Not all participants went into as much detail with this definition. One respondent simply defined sport management as “the business side of sports.” Another indicated it was “the study of sport business.” Similarly, another participant labeled it as “the business functions of the sport industry.” Another faculty member defined the academy as “a business approach to sport.”

## **Management**

Although a broad term, “management” was utilized by 39 respondents (25.32%). One participant defined sport management as “the management of sport entities.” Another stated it was the “management of sport organization.” Yet another participant defined it as “the management side of sports.”

One participant included the functions of the management process in their definition: “Sport management includes a combination of things related to organizing, planning, leading, directing, and evaluating a program that is at its core a service providing sport and physical activities to an organization or group.” Similarly, another respondent articulated, “Sports management is the management of sports organizations . . . the implementation of the planning, organization, coordination, control functions, to coordinate the activities of others, play a variety of resources, [and] activities in the process of achieving target.” Furthermore, a faculty member defined sport management as “management in the areas of sport, health, and physical activity.” Another faculty member defined the discipline as “the study of/application of management principles and practices to the domain of sport.”

## **Recreation**

Twenty-five respondents (16.23%) described sport management in recreation or leisure contexts. One faculty member described it as “recreational activities relating to competition.” Another faculty member stated it was “recreation services.” One faculty member simply answered, “The leisure industry.” One participant believed that although sport may be involved, certain emphases are considered

recreation: “I strongly believe youth sport and community sport are within the domain of recreation.”

### **“Lost in Translation”**

All other answers (22.08%) appeared to be considerably different. Although we recognize that in essence “other” is not a theme, it is important to note the discrepancy within the field for 22.08% of the faculty members who participated in this study. One participant defined sport management as “decision making in various sport settings.” Another simply answered, “Broad based.” Similarly, another faculty member responded, “The field involving the study and/or production of any activities, events, and programming related sports and physical activities.” Thus, the results of the study can be directly interpreted to strongly suggest that not only is sport management multidisciplinary in nature, but also sport management faculty members possess a unilateral perception of the academy and therefore employ varying definitions of sport management. For example, when asked to define sport management, one respondent postulated it was “a degree lost in translation.”

Additionally, several respondents gave definitions of sport management that related to academia. One participant remarked that it was “learning how to take the theory learned in classes and apply it to the various dimensions of the sport industry.” Another believed it was “a collection of academic scholars who study management science as it relates to the effective, efficient, and creative management of sport facilities, sport corporations, not-for-profit sport, collegiate sport administration, leisure, and recreation, and many other sport-related business.”

Few respondents (2.60%) indicated that athlete development was a part of the sport management discipline. Only four faculty members mentioned “coaching” within their definition of sport management. One faculty indicated that sport management was “the study of sport in anything other than coaching and athletic training.” Of the 154 respondents, none included “athlete” in any definition of sport management.

## **Discussion**

Informed by Foucault’s (1971) theory of discourse, this study explored the perceptions of sport management scholars regarding

sport management as an academic discipline. This investigation was critical to provide empirical evidence to support conceptual studies discussing the direction and viability of sport management as a field within higher education (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2013b; Hancock & Greenwell, 2013). This study found four distinct themes from which faculty participants defined the field of sport management. Three of these themes were rooted within established, preexisting academic fields, while the fourth was more a mixture of responses difficult to categorize or more focused on the tangible application of their students' career outlets. These findings provide some unique insights into not only the field of sport management but also other academic programs rooted within preexisting fields.

### **Harm to Faculty**

According to Foucault (1969/1972), it is crucial to eliminate interpretation to ensure meaning and understanding. The lack of definition consensus can create damage to current and future faculty in the field of sport management. On the basis of the participants' responses for defining sport management, it may lead to perceived bias or discrimination of the chosen research topics of other sport management faculty. For example, an aspiring researcher examining interscholastic sports could have a more difficult job convincing sport management faculty who believe the field is rooted within business literature than those who view it as more multidisciplinary. With a majority of faculty in this study viewing sport management within a business model, this would be more problematic for those with research interests outside of traditional business topics, such as finance and marketing. This bias goes beyond securing employment. Sport management faculty may be pressured to publish in journals outside of their field as a form of verification of study quality, such as in business or education journals (Chalip, 2006). This raises legitimacy concerns for the field of sport management and will continue to undermine the value of sport management publications for the foreseeable future.

### **Forgetting Our History**

There were limited responses from participants who view sport management through its original lens of practical solutions, which is more focused on the theoretical and the professional setting

(Seifried, 2015). Such responses also align with Foucault's (1971) theory of discourse in that history often places a constraint on truth, creating notions of right and wrong. However, perhaps this transitional phase may be an expected change that occurs to programs as they mature (Chalip, 2006). Notions of the truth can create division and boundaries, leading to classification of social constructs (Foucault, 1971; Razack et al., 2015). This transitional phase also can create an imbalance between the needs of practitioners, who employ students graduating from college, and the pressures put upon scholars, who are expected to educate these students while meeting the scholarly expectations of their field (Foucault, 1971; Razack et al., 2015). Findings ways to make theoretical and practical impact is achievable, but it is difficult within a field becoming more focused on theoretical impact as a means to support itself as a stand-alone research field (Doherty, 2013a). The hope is that we do not forget about our students' goals and become imbalanced to the point of graduates from different programs filling jobs within the sport industry as ours become less equipped for their intended careers. Although it can be argued that within all fields there will always be variances and nuances of the makeup of the discipline, there is a need for proponents of the field (i.e., faculty) to provide validity to the field.

### **Lack of Establishment**

Participant responses demonstrated that sport management faculty members are noncommittal on defining the field based on many of the preexisting fields that initially conceived sport management programs (Seifried, 2015). The majority of participants perceived sport management as rooted within business (business or management related, 59%). The remaining responses were either related to recreation (16%) or could not be categorized (22%). With a lack of consensus defining sport management, it begs the question, would the discipline benefit from being multidisciplinary? Or should a more narrow focus of sport management be employed as the field continues to develop and grow? The lack of consistency in the field may be a response to careers in sport management still being in their adolescence (in comparison to many other vocational outlets), therefore leading to sport management faculty wanting the flexibility to change as they observe changes in the field. Such lack of consensus also brings up the question, is sport management a discipline?

Chalip (2006) claimed sport management is a field of study, so perhaps the discrepancy within sport management validates that sport management is informed by various disciplines and is indeed a field of study (not a discipline).

Furthermore, such lack of consistency can also be a negative. Established programs and experts connected to the needs of the sport industry have helped establish the most vital classes needed for up-and-coming sport management students (COSMA, 2015a). Failing to use this knowledge can lead to losing generational knowledge and ignoring best practices established within the field. Currently, just over 12% of all identified sport management programs follow COSMA standards (COSMA, 2015a), raising concerns about its established value within the field. It is also important to note that as sport management programs are housed in various colleges, perhaps accreditation consideration should be sought within the overarching discipline (Noorda, 2011; Zaharia et al., 2016).

Doherty (2013a) asserted that the art, science, and continued growth of sport management hinges on the use and generation of sound theories; its distinctive body of knowledge; and critical, scholarly self-reflection. Ongoing, rigorous inquiry, Doherty (2013a) wrote, is both useful and necessary for the credibility of sport management and for advancing understanding within and across this ever-growing field of study. The continued absence of a unifying, theoretical core that precisely articulates sport management's distinct value and relevance to society could inevitably undermine its viability and survival (Doherty, 2013a). It is crucial that the sport management discipline is not left to interpretation but rather evolves to a specific definition to advance the discipline, ensuring meaning and understanding (Foucault, 1969/1972).

## **Limitations and Future Research**

As with any study, this study has limitations. While this study has a large number of faculty participants, the response rate is lower than anticipated and desired; however, it aligns with the response rates of similar studies (e.g., Stokowski et al., 2018; Zaharia et al., 2016). The response rate may be due to the high number of emails faculty receive in general, including those that request their participation in research. It is important to note that research has shown that a lower response rate does not mean the results are skewed or

incorrect (Curtin et al., 2000; Groves, 2006; Peytchev, 2013). So although the response rate in this study was lower than predicted, it does not mean the results were biased. The insights from the faculty in this study can form the foundation for beginning a conversation about what the discipline is and what we want to be going forward. Therefore, it is important not to generalize the findings of this study, as this study included only sport management faculty at institutions included on the NASSM list of sport management programs worldwide. It should also be noted that we are sport management faculty members, and as in any qualitative study, researcher bias could have impacted the results of this study.

Studies (e.g., Jones et al., 2008; Mahony, 2008; Zaharia et al., 2016) have found that sport management educational programs were housed in education, business, and health. This study seems to echo this finding. However, given that sport management programs are housed in various colleges, it would have been helpful to see if the colleges in which sport management programs were housed viewed the discipline similarly. For example, did just those within business define sport management as “the business of sport”?

There are a number of recommendations for future research. First, there is a need to further these results by surveying faculty and leadership on what courses they want to offer for their program and what learning and assessments should be measured from their students. Second, further empirical examination of differences based on faculty expectations or Carnegie Classification of the institution is warranted. It is possible that the perception of sport management being multidisciplinary could vary depending on the research and teaching expectations of the faculty member. Another potential difference is related to the participants’ department mission statement. Studies have shown that mission statements can impact the actions of internal stakeholders; thus, participants’ perceptions of sport management could be altered by their organizational culture (Andrassy & Bruening, 2011; Huml et al., 2014). This study could be replicated to include the opinion of prospective, current, and recently graduated students. This could help identify weaknesses in the field and/or recommendations from those having to use the skills learned in the classroom within the sport industry. Future research should survey and examine sport management faculty as well as curriculums on

a global scale. Future studies should also examine the pedagogical approaches of sport management faculty members. What does this population feel is the purpose of higher education? What is the role of sport management faculty members? Are sport management faculty members simply training practitioners or is the role of faculty to educate the next generation of practitioners?

### **Practical Implications**

Results of this study also bring forth multiple issues that should be considered by academic organizations acting as advocates for sport management faculty: If sport management is indeed about the business of sport (as so many respondents indicated), why are the majority of sport management academic programs housed under the umbrella of an education-based academic unit? If recreation is a prominent aspect of the field, why do so few programs carry the word “recreation” in their monikers? Furthermore, on the basis of the comments, perhaps sport management scholars feel that athlete development does not belong within the discipline. After all, the only comment that referred to “players” basically implied that athletes should be controlled and not developed. On the basis of their responses, clearly there is a disconnect between sport management and athlete development. Perhaps sport is simply too interdisciplinary to be a stand-alone discipline. Perhaps sport management is simply a field of study that should be incorporated into other disciplines (e.g., psychology, sociology, business, higher education, communication).

This study offers a vital first step in an empirical examination of a critical phenomenon in the sport management academy. Foucault (1970) advocated for an expansion and modernization of human sciences, expanding and further explaining knowledge and the interpretation of knowledge. Faculty members and sport management governing bodies and organizations need to come together to employ definitions that speak to the discipline in its entirety. However, this study also brings to light that perhaps sport is simply too diverse to be under a single umbrella and scholars (as well as sport management programs) should specialize to better contribute to sport, research, and student development. Currently, the perceived truth is creating division and boundaries within the sport management discipline (Foucault, 1971; Razack et al., 2015). Sport management

scholars have to find the truth within the discipline to evolve (Foucault, 1971).

This study provides further questions about what courses make up the sport management discipline worldwide. There is currently no consensus for the courses and concepts being taught in sport management programs. COSMA requires accredited programs to have common professional components within the curriculum. However, not all sport management programs choose to go through the accreditation process. Thus, there is no way to ensure that all students with a sport management major are learning the same core concepts. As such, the preparedness of students may vary based on whether the program is COSMA accredited, how the faculty at an institution define sport management, and where the program is housed in an institution. A set of guiding standards and principles, along with a solid focus and definition that drives sport management, would help not only the discipline but also the students who are in the major.

This study strives to provide a deeper understanding of sport management faculty members' perceptions of sport management as a discipline. Foucault (1971) believed there is a right and wrong in relation to power dynamics, the perpetuation of the status quo, and the repetition of behavior. We understand that some feel there is no one universal truth. Furthermore, we realize that this study may leave more questions than answers; however, this is our intention. We even realize that some may feel recreation, management, and business are sport management. Our goal is for the "establishment" to continue to have constructive dialogue and critical reflection about sport management—who we are and where we are going.

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