

# **A Concern for the Future of Sport Management: Female Students' Perceptions Toward Their Sport Management Degree**

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## **Abstract**

*Women continue to be underrepresented in both management positions in sport as well as sport management academic degree programs. Despite the increase in the number of women participating in sport at the high school and college levels as well as the increase of women pursuing non-traditional academic majors, a disparity remains. This qualitative study utilized focus groups of female sport management undergraduates to examine their perceptions of the academic environment and their degrees. Results indicate women perceive there to be a lack of information about the sport management degree, a concern regarding outsider's perceptions of the degree, and a chilly climate in the sport management classroom.*

## **Introduction**

Colleges and universities in the United States have seen a considerable increase in female enrollment. This enrollment is due in part to Title IX legislation passed in 1972 that prohibited discrimination in education. Estimates indicate women comprise more than half (57%) of postsecondary students (King, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 1994, 2009) and have shown significant enrollment progress in traditionally male-dominated academic postgraduate programs to levels greater than the males, including medicine (51% female) and other health-science programs (53% female) (King, 2006). Although women have experienced increased access to male-dominated academic fields, their advancement has not translated to undergraduate sport management programs (American Council on Education, 2006; Jones & Brooks, 2008). Jones and Brooks (2008) found that 81% of sport management programs nationwide reported a female student population of less than 40%.

According to the National Federation of State High School Associations (2010), female athletic participation at the high school level has increased by 456.8% since the 1970s and 15.4% over the last two decades. Additionally, Acosta and Carpenter (2012) as well as the National Collegiate Athletic Association (2010) noted the increase in female participation at the collegiate level. In fact, athletic participation for females is at the highest it has ever been. As Acosta and Carpenter (2012) note, "Increased participation in interscholastic as well as intercollegiate sport for both females and males continues to be the norm" (p. 9). While female athletic participation has increased, the underrepresentation of females employed within the sport industry mirrors that of female sport management students (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012; Lapchick, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2013). Acosta and Carpenter (2012) reported the proportion of women head coaches had declined from 90% in 1972 to 42.9% in 2012, while the percent of female athletic directors declined to 20.3% from an estimated 90% during the same period.

Scholars (DeSensi, 1994; Hums, 1994; Moore, Parkhouse, & Konrad, 2004) have suggested that to increase diversity within the management of sport, we must first examine what is happening in the sport management classroom. Considering the underrepresentation of women within sport management undergraduate programs emulates that of women employed within the sport industry, it could prove valuable to gain insight from those women currently in the major. These insights could provide valuable information to academics preparing students for future positions in sport, as well as those working in sport with regards to diversity in sport organizations. Further, the information provided could assist in attracting more female students to the academic major of sport management while helping sport management faculty and staff develop more effective strategies for the recruitment and retention of women in their programs.

### ***Field of sport management***

James G. Mason, a physical educator at the University of Miami was one of the original founders of the sport management core curriculum. Mason founded the first postgraduate sport management degree at Ohio University in 1966 (Parkhouse & Pitts, 2001). Shortly thereafter, Biscayne College and St. John's University offered the first undergraduate sport management programs. Since the 1960s, the number of colleges offering sport management programs has grown rapidly. The North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM, 2013) recognizes 292 United States colleges and institutions offering undergraduate sport management degrees. Although an academic degree in business is applicable, more sport management experts are finding specific sport degrees better prepare students for the uniqueness or "intricacies peculiar to the sport industry" (Masterallexis, Barr, & Hums, 2009, p. 19). The sport-specific curriculum has evolved extensively due to the exponential growth of the industry and the need for a systematic academic program to educate future sport professionals.

Hums (1994) found men comprised 75% of sport management students, while women comprised 25%. Moore, Parkhouse, and Conrad (2004) also reported an underrepresentation of female undergraduate students in sport management. Finally, Jones and Brooks (2008) found that 40% of sport management programs reported a female student population of 20% or less. Undergraduate sport management academic programs continue to be predominantly male-dominated. Although women have shown significant progress in traditionally male-dominated academic postgraduate programs (King, 2006), their advancement has not yet translated to the sport management academic field.

### ***Educational choice***

Regarding choice of educational major, women have made in-roads in traditionally male-dominated areas of study. However, gender disparity still exists in some college majors (e.g., some science and engineering fields) (Hagedorn, Nora, & Pascarella, 1996; Leslie & Oaxaca, 1998). This disparity could be the direct result of the tendency for women to select academic majors perceived to be dominated by women (Jacobs, 1986; Lackland & De Lisi, 2001; Solnick, 1995). Because choice of undergraduate major influences future job stability, satisfaction, and job earnings (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, 2001), as well as life satisfaction (Carbonero & Merino, 2004), gender inequality has prompted investigation about the educational and vocational choice process.

Eccles (1987) found that education and vocational choices were influenced by the value an individual places on potential majors or employment options and the confidence exhibited by that individual to succeed at those options. Eccles (1987) acknowledged that individuals do not

always recognize the full range of education and vocational options, and further, she proposed that “individuals often overlook options because they do not align with their gender-role schema” (p. 141). In other words, educational or vocational “activities classified as part of the opposite sex’s role may be rejected without any serious evaluation or consideration” (p. 141). This finding may offer insight into the underrepresentation of women studying in sport (a male-dominated field).

Eccles, Adler, and Meece (1984) found parents and school counselors to significantly influence education and vocational information. Eccles and Hoffman (1984) found that school counselors were less likely to provide high school students with information on nontraditional occupations than on traditional ones. Eccles (1987) suggested that this is due to the numerous responsibilities and workload of school counselors, which constrains them to rely on pre-packaged college information to help guide students in their college decisions. However, comprehensive career counseling has been found to increase the representation of female students in math and science, typically male-dominated academic fields (Fennema, Wolleat, Pedro, & Becker, 1981). Casserly (1980) found that schools with large numbers of female students enrolled in advanced math and science had teachers who placed a high value on career counseling and encouraging students to pursue those fields.

Eccles (1987) proposed an individual’s perception of cost (e.g., family-work conflict, amount of training required) associated with participating in a particular education or vocational activity could also affect the potential options females consider. Females may experience a higher perception of cost associated with specific education and vocational options as research has found women are more likely than men to perceive the need to modify their work roles for the sake of their family (Boles, Howard, & Donofrio, 2001; Tittle, 1982). In fact, Tittle (1982) found less than 10% of participating females believed they would continue to work while their children were three years of age or younger. This belief could negatively impact females’ entrance into sports, as the industry is known for longer work hours and lower salary ranges.

Parents, teachers, school counselors, role models, and peers can also positively and negatively influence an individual’s perception of available education and vocational options. Eccles, Adler, and Meece (1984) found parents to be a major source of education and vocational information and guidance for youth. Parents are an instrumental contributor to an individuals’ belief in traditional gender roles. Comprehensive career counseling has also been found to increase the representation of females in math and science, typically male-dominated fields (Fennema, Wolleat, Pedro, & Becker, 1981). Furthermore, Casserly (1980) found schools with large numbers of female students taking advanced math and science courses (e.g., typically male-dominated fields), were led by teachers who placed a higher value on career counseling and encouraging students to pursue math and science fields.

### **The chilly climate**

One theory which may contribute to the educational and vocational choice process is called chilly climate, proposed by Hall and Sandler (1982). They coined chilly climate to describe a male-dominated educational environment that inequitably treated women who entered or remained within certain fields, most notably male-dominated majors. Allan and Madden (2006) suggested that female college students still experience various chilly behaviors from their male classmates. Hall and Sandler (1982) identified both overt (e.g., discouraging female participation in class, making sexist jokes) and subtle (e.g., making better eye contact with men, giving men more detailed instruction on assignments, calling on men more often) behaviors

typical of chilly climates. Hall and Sandler noted that the chilly climate may prevent women from choosing to enter, or may cause women to leave a traditionally male-dominated major.

Brainard and Colin (1998) noted that women in traditionally male-dominated areas such as the sciences, perceived barriers blocking their way to their degree and that those barriers led to feelings of isolation and a loss of self-confidence as they progressed in their major. These behaviors included men taking over leadership roles, making sexual remarks or using sexual humor, and interrupting and ignoring women's ideas. Over 20 years after Hall and Sandler's study, evidence of the chilly climate still exists (Allen & Madden, 2006; Janz & Pyke, 2000).

While women have experienced increased access to educational and athletic participation and they are beginning to experience increased access to male-dominated academic fields, women remain underrepresented in sport management programs (Jones & Brooks, 2008). The purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation to examine the perceptions of undergraduate female sport management students toward their degree and their educational environment.

### **Methods**

Examining the perceptions of undergraduate female sport management students can provide insight into the factors underlying the underrepresentation of women in sport. Therefore, qualitative methods were utilized to garner information regarding the educational experiences and perceptions of females that were currently involved in sport management programs. Krueger and Casey (2000) found that the best use of focus group instrumentation was to determine the perceptions and feelings of people about certain issues. Therefore, focus group instrumentation was used to examine the perceptions of female sport management students, as well as to provide preliminary insight into an understudied population.

Focus groups have been defined as a "carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment" (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 5). To allow participants to feel comfortable in disclosing personal information in a group setting, they were given aliases to use throughout focus group discussions. Additionally, focus group participants were asked to sign a statement of confidentiality. Krueger and Casey (2000) also recommended that a study employ several focus groups. Therefore, three different focus group discussions, with a total of 16 different participants were included in this study.

### **Participants**

A convenience sample of female undergraduate sport management students from a large NCAA Division I institution in the Southeast were asked to participate in focus groups. Two sport management professors were contacted via telephone for permission to speak to their female sport management students prior to their classes. To allow participants to feel comfortable in disclosing personal information in a group setting and to maintain confidentiality, they were given aliases to use throughout focus group discussions.

Participants were grouped into three pre-determined focus group dates based on participants' availability. The first focus group consisted of seven participants, the second consisted of three participants, and the final group was comprised of six participants. Focus group participants ( $N=16$ ) were all in the age range of 20 to 22 and were single with no children. A majority of

focus group participants ( $n=15$ ) were White/Caucasian, with only one African-American student. All focus group participants ( $N=16$ ) reported having at least one year of sport work experience, with half of them reporting they have four or more years work experience.

### ***Procedures***

At the onset of focus group interviews, participants were given a survey that asked information specific to participant demographics (e.g., age, race, marital status, number of dependents), educational background (e.g., grade level, grade point average, collegiate athletic participation), and future career expectations (e.g., entry-level salaries and work experiences). Introductions were made, and then questioning began. Krueger and Casey's (2000) questioning route was utilized to elicit the feelings and perceptions of participants. The opening question was used to encourage everyone's participation. The introductory and transition questions were used to initiate discussion. The key questions were used to more fully understand the meanings of their experiences. The ending questions were used to help participants to reflect on their comments, as well as add any final comments. Probing questions were also used to better understand and confirm participant responses (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

There was only one moderator during the focus group discussions. Audio recordings and transcriptions were used to increase the accuracy of the data collection. Notes were also taken to capture additional information on non-verbal participant behavior. At the conclusion of the focus groups, the notes were reviewed to assist in quality control to further guarantee the accuracy of the data obtained.

### ***Analysis***

The focus group transcripts were analyzed by two investigators who coded and searched respondents' conversations for independent themes and concepts. The principal investigator identified statements related to the perceptions of female sport management students in relation to the academic environment and sport management degree. Each statement was assigned a code that best summarized the quote, and then a label was assigned to capture the essence of the quote. A second investigator, a sport management expert, executed additional analysis to help ensure accuracy (Krueger & Casey, 2000). If any discrepancies in the codes were found, a third investigator would have been used until an agreement was reached. However, there were no discrepancies, and thus a third member was not needed.

Credibility was established through the authenticity of giving a "fair, honest, and balanced account of social life from the viewpoint of someone who lives it every day" (Neuman, 2000, p. 31). To provide detailed information on the study's data, respondents' quotes from the focus group transcriptions were used to help illustrate the coding and themes. "Thick description" was utilized to validate the meaning of participants' responses and the investigators' interpretations (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Informal member checking, in which the investigator verbally summarizes a participant's statement, was used throughout the focus group process to validate the accuracy of participants' responses (Erlandson et al., 1993).

## Results

### ***Perceptions regarding the sport management degree***

Nearly all focus group participants ( $n=15$ ) shared their impressions of the sport management degree (Table 1), with only one ( $n=1$ ) focus group participant offering no feedback in relation to her sport management degree. The two following overarching themes emerged regarding the sport management degree: (a) perceptions regarding an undergraduate sport management degree (e.g., lack of knowledge of degree existence, awareness of major being male-dominated/chilly climate, outsiders' perceptions of the degree), and (b) perceptions regarding a postgraduate sport management degree (e.g. lack of access to information, indecisiveness regarding post graduate degree, and the awareness of the importance of a post graduate degree). Qualitative results from focus group discussions are presented in subsections below.

### ***Perceptions regarding undergraduate degree***

In response to questions about the timing of their decision to enroll in a sport management academic program, two subcategories emerged regarding this theme: (a) participants who found out about the sport management degree after beginning their college studies, and (b) participants who knew about the sport management degree prior to their college enrollment.

### ***Lack of knowledge of the degree and delayed transfer into the program***

Over half of focus group participants ( $n=9$ ) indicated no previous knowledge related to the existence of a sport-specific academic degree prior to their college enrollment. For instance, Abbie recalled finding out about sport management while studying a different curriculum at the university. "I learned about the program as I started working in intramural sports and my boss told me about it," recalled Abbie. While Michelle did not specify the way she found out about the sport management curriculum, she recalled learning of the program during her second year of college after having "original plans of doing a biology degree." Likewise, Jane conveyed learning of the program "[at] the end of [her] sophomore year." Emma found out about the program her "freshman year of college [at another university]" and transferred in, "not really expect[ing] to stay in the [program]." Similarly, Ellen recalled not "even know[ing] until halfway through [her] freshman year when an advisor said [she] should really think about the sport management program" based on her favorite class topics and assignments.

Nearly half of focus group participants ( $n=7$ ) indicated prior knowledge of the sport management program before enrolling in college. For instance, Pam recalled learning of the program during the "college search" process, which was required by her high school. Katie reported finding out about the program in high school through "a guy [she] was dating who was studying sport management." However, she began college as a "poly-polymer chemistry major" and later transferred to sport management.

Participants ( $n=5$ ) who indicated knowledge of the sport management degree prior to college conveyed finding out about the degree due to athletic participation, sport-specific projects, or jobs related to sport. For instance, Mary noted finding out about the degree during "recruiting trips [for intercollegiate athletics] where [she] talked to people and they were telling [her] that [she] might be good in PE since [she] likes sports." Mary expressed not "know[ing] it was a degree until [she] picked the schools [she] went on recruiting trips to." Jennifer indicated "going through the recruiting process... and [having] no idea what [she] wanted to do... [but] then [she]

just saw a flash of sport management and thought ‘oh that’s perfect.’” Mackenzie recalled finding out about the sport management program in high school, due to a “graduation project” related to sport and it was “something [she] thought that would be interesting to study further.” Mel learned of the program due to “a sport marketing class... [and] going on field trips [in high school].” Kris recalled “[finding] out about [sport management] when [she] was a senior in high school... on the JV chain crew... and managing [the] JV and Varsity football team.”

### ***Perceptions of sport management being male-dominated and the chilly climate***

Nearly half of the participants ( $n=6$ ) indicated an underrepresentation of women within the sport management program (see Table 1). The remaining participants ( $n=10$ ) within the sample offered no comments regarding this topic. Two subcategories emerged regarding this theme: (a) significant underrepresentation of female sport management students within classes/program, and (b) effort required compensating for the underrepresentation of women within the program.

Nearly half of the participants ( $n=6$ ) indicated an underrepresentation of female sport management students within the program. For instance, Mel explained when she “came for orientation, I was the only girl out of 26 [guys] in my group, that’s very intimidating when you’re on your first day on a college campus.” She indicated she was aware of the gender disproportion, saying, “In my classes there is a handful of girls and tons of guys and it’s a lot more challenging.” Pam added, “With four girls and forty guys... it’s intimidating being in a class with all guys.” Kris said, “Being a female in this major is kind of hard [because] I’ve been the only women in the classroom, and sometimes it’s frustrating.” Katie added, “Classes are a majority guys, there were many instances where I was the only girl in the group.”

Nearly half of participants ( $n=6$ ) indicated that extra effort was required to compensate for the underrepresentation of women within the program. For instance, Mel encouraged the group, saying, “Take advantage of the situation... when you’re working in groups take the leadership role... speak up and be the one to raise your hand and be vocal, make relationships with your teachers.” Pam believes that females need to be comfortable “talking about issues that you just know stereotypically [guys] think they know more about.” Kristy recommended “definitely keep up with ESPN, read sporting news, and keep up with that so you can talk to those guys in your classes, because it will be mostly guys.” Kris believed female sport management students “have to work and do twice as much as [their] male counterparts,” and “not take a lot of crap from guys... put your foot down.” Jennifer explained previous experiences of being the “only girl in [all guys] group, they expect you to do everything.” Katie indicated that a certain “leadership style” helps to counteract the gender disproportion, in which women “take charge to begin with” and “end up doing most of the work.”

### ***Outsiders’ perceptions of sport management degree***

Participants ( $n=14$ ) indicated concern regarding outsiders’ perceptions of their sport management curriculum (see Table 1). Three subcategories emerged regarding this theme: (a) explaining the sport management degree to outsiders, (b) receiving discouragement from outsiders regarding their sport management degree, and (c) justifying the sport management curriculum. A few participants ( $n=2$ ) had nothing to offer about outsiders’ perceptions of the sport management degree.

Table 1

*Information on Sport Management Degree*

Focus Group	Alias	Access to Undergraduate Information	Access to Post-Graduate Information	Underrepresentation of Women Sport Management	Concerned with Others Perceptions
1	Mackenzie	No	Yes	NA	Yes
1	Jane	Yes	Yes	NA	No
1	Hanna	No	Yes	NA	Yes
1	Ann	No	Yes	NA	Yes
1	Abbie	Yes	NA	NA	No
1	Mary	No	Yes	NA	Yes
1	Michelle	Yes	NA	NA	Yes
2	Kristy	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Mel	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Pam	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Jennifer	No	NA	Yes	Yes
3	Ellen	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	Kris	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Katie	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Emma	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
3	Laura	No	No	Yes	Yes

Participants ( $n=10$ ) indicated occasions in which they were required to explain their degree to family, friends, and peers. For instance, Mackenzie recalled, "When people ask what your major is and you say sport management... they're like 'well, what do you want to do with that one day?'" Mary explained the misconception of sport management as "[associated with] PE teachers or something like that... the whole sport management major itself isn't really well known enough, they just don't know enough of the major to look good upon it." Ann agreed, saying, "You do kind of have to explain yourself and why you're doing it." Jo indicated, "People don't know about it... a lot of people don't know about the curriculum and what it entails." Mel explained, "A lot of people" believe the sport curriculum is very narrowly focused and limited to "going to school to be a 'coach' [but] I'm like, 'no there are fifty things that I can go to school for with this degree.'" Pam agreed, saying, "With my parents... they just wanted to make sure that it was very business... I remember they kept saying, 'is that something where you can go on and get your MBA?'" Moreover, Jennifer also noted the misconception about sport management, in which "they don't understand it's just like business or anything else... it's almost harder because it so concentrated." Kris explained that she too "had to explain it to most of my colleagues and other college students." Likewise, Ellen also experienced people asking her "what I'm majoring

in and I say 'sport management' and they ask 'well what can you do with that?'" Lastly, Katie expressed frustration with this commonality, saying:

I hate whenever anyone asks me what I'm doing, I tell them 'sport management' and they, always say 'well what can you do with that?' I have a difficult time trying to explain it to some people because they just don't comprehend that it's a new field and a lot of people are trying to get in it, they just don't understand that it's business.

Participants ( $n=3$ ) expressed receiving discouragement from family, friends, and peers regarding their degree of choice. For instance, Mel explained her experiences with her dad regarding her degree, saying, "He wasn't super keen on the idea of sport management." Pam recalled her reservation in telling peers about her degree choice, saying, "I do remember that I didn't really talk much about it to my high school friends because I did think it was just kind of random sounding." Katie explained that "[her] parents," were definitely "not stoked" about her degree of choice.

Participants ( $n=11$ ) expressed frustration at having to justify their sport management degree to others. For instance, Mary explained that she feels people "look down on me because I study sport management" because they think "you just do that 'cause you're an athlete'... [and] they think it's like the easy major or easy way out." Ann agreed regarding outsiders' "negative connotation" towards the sport management degree because they believe "it's going to be easy." Jo said it is "not seen as a harder major... because it's nontraditional." Michelle explained her family's hesitation regarding her career choice, saying:

When they hear about a major that they don't know much about, at first they get a little worried and are like 'oh no, she's going to be on my payroll for another couple of years'...so they want to make sure that they get us on out of there.

Mel indicated, "It kind of annoys me when people say, 'oh, that's probably an easy degree, you're in classes with all the athletes and it's probably super easy,' people think it's just a pushover, easy major." Kristy recalled her mother's "brushing it off as the easy major for people who couldn't really get in unless they were athletes." Similarly, Kris indicated her "colleagues and other college students see sport management as easy... even when you tell people, they say 'it's easy.'" Emma added, "Whenever somebody asks me about my major, it's a pain always having to defend myself." Katie noted experiencing this misconception with students from other programs who also say, "You're taking the easy classes." Jennifer said, "The biggest stereotype that comes along with being a sport management major is whenever you tell someone they think, 'she took an easy major out.'"

### ***Perceptions regarding postgraduate degree***

Participants ( $n=12$ ) perceived a lack of available information regarding postgraduate sport management degrees (See Table 1). A handful of participants ( $n=3$ ) verbalized the importance of obtaining a postgraduate degree, while only one focus group participant ( $n=1$ ) offered no comment related to this topic. Three subcategories emerged regarding this theme: (a) a lack of access to readily available information concerning postgraduate or advanced sport degrees, (b) educational or career indecisiveness due to the lack of ready information, and (c) the importance of postgraduate degrees for women.

Participants ( $n=9$ ) communicated a lack of access to readily available information regarding postgraduate sport degrees. For instance, Ann indicated a lack of knowledge regarding the importance of a postgraduate degree until she began “applying for internships [in which] they preferred a masters [degree]” and recalled it was too late, as it was “a month before graduation.” Mackenzie expressed confusion with where to obtain information regarding postgraduate degrees, saying, “I’m just unsure of how much help I can get in grad school and just learning [more] information about it.” Jo recalled no information “com[ing] out in our classes” and students feel they “need more guidance on how to get more information,” which would be “helpful just to find out more about the different programs.” While Mary reported having previous knowledge of graduate school sport management programs, she would have liked more information because she “didn’t think [she] would have picked the same [graduate] schools.” Mel recalled wanting “more advice on postgraduate degrees cause I want to get my masters... you kind of have to research it on your own.” Pam agreed, communicating that her professors don’t talk about it too much, as far as which jobs [in sport] need [post-graduate degrees] and I don’t know if they think we know, but personally I don’t... up until now I just have been assuming that I would figure that out. Katie added, “I haven’t really heard much about furthering my degree... I haven’t really heard much about continuing your education.” Kris clarified she too had “been looking at different grad schools and you really have to do your homework, it’s not... where you can easily find it.” Katie added, “I didn’t really know where to look at as far as going to get my masters either.”

Participants ( $n=4$ ) expressed indecisiveness between continuing their education or pursuing a specific career in sport. Mary noted being “stressed about it,” because she “had no idea what [she] wants to do.” Jane expressed being “really stressed out” because she only had 10 days to decide. She explained that she was “educated on the opportunities that we had, but not in a way that was going to be enough to make a decision.” Pam expressed indecisiveness, saying, “I don’t know because people ask me if I want to go to grad school and I still don’t know.” Jennifer gave additional insight into the source of indecisiveness, explaining,

I think I want a few years of experience first to make sure that what I’m getting my masters [degree] in is definitely something that I plan on pursuing [because] every year of my college career I’ve changed what I want to be doing... that could change after an internship or entry level [position].

Participants ( $n=3$ ) discussed the importance of postgraduate degrees for women in sport. Michelle expressed the belief that “for women, it is a little bit more important to have a master’s degree or doctorate, because men are taking more female jobs.” Laura questioned the importance of a postgraduate degree, explaining she knows other “females who haven’t gotten jobs because they were overqualified with a masters ... it kind of depends on what [field] you want to do.” Jennifer agreed that the importance of postgraduate degrees depends on the field, saying, “every professional [she] has ever talk[ed] to has a different [level of degree] ... you can’t just rely on doing a certain pathway of education... it’s kind of hard to say.”

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate female sport management students’ perceptions toward their sport management degree and educational environment. Information was attained with major themes developing as well as subthemes that provide insight into the perspectives of female undergraduate sport management students.

Participants indicated transferring into the sport management program from other academic fields as freshman and sophomores. More than half of the participants recalled a lack of knowledge regarding the existence of sport management academic programs prior to their enrollment in college. Previous research has identified potential contributors to this lack of knowledge. Focus group participants, like other students, rely on their parents to assist them in the educational and vocational decision-making process (Howe & Strauss, 2003). Sport management is a relatively new field of academic study as the first program was not created until 1966. Thus, many parents as well as students may not know that it even exists. It also could be that even today, sport management programs are still evolving and often times housed in varying departments, thus making it harder to conduct a search for programs. Further, high school counselors greatly contribute to the information on potential educational and vocational choices provided to high school students. Considering high school counselors are less likely to provide education and vocational information on nontraditional occupations (Eccles & Hoffman, 1984), sport management is at a disadvantage.

Participants who indicated knowledge of the sport management program prior to their enrollment in college attributed this to specific experiences in sport (i.e., intercollegiate athletic participation, sport-specific college assignments, and relevant work experience). This may be the direct result of women's increased participation in high school and college athletics and may translate into more female sport management students in the future. Hopefully, this participation will lead to more women finding out about sport management programs and seeking degrees and jobs in the field. However, simply having women in the pipeline (i.e., more women participating in sport) does not necessarily translate into more women choosing or staying in sport management degree programs.

Whitmarsh, Brown, Cooper, Hawkins-Rodgers, and Wentworth (2007) found that women in gender-neutral careers were strongly discouraged by their parents from pursuing a traditionally male-dominated career. Eccles et al. (1984) found that parents were the strongest contributor to an individual's acceptance of traditional gender roles and speculated that individuals overlook educational and career options that do not align with their "gender-role schema" (p. 141). Specific to this study group, participants indicated receiving discouragement from their parents regarding their sport management pursuits, explaining their parents' reactions as not "super keen" or "stoked." These findings suggested that women may experience a lack of social support from parents or immediate networks that might have helped them choose to study a nontraditional field. This could explain why a majority of the focus group participants had transferred into the major from other college majors.

Participants indicated experiencing negative feedback regarding their degree of choice from parents, family members, friends, and college peers studying other majors. This lack of social support has been found to undermine the self-confidence of high school and college-aged women to pursue a particular occupation (Caldera, Robitschek, Frame, & Pannel, 2003) and may be encouraging women to choose more gender-neutral or female-dominated educational and occupational fields. Although additional research is needed to confirm why these perceptions exist, empirical evidence suggests many influences. For example, outsiders' perceptions of a lack of difficulty may be the result of the tendency for sport management programs to have low admission requirements (Sawyer, 1993). Additionally, the lack of consensus regarding the proper department placement (e.g. in schools of health sciences or in schools of education rather than in schools of business) for sport management may contribute to the perception that sport is a nontraditional educational choice (Stier, 1993). During the

college search, potential students and their parents may be confused to see sport management housed in different departments at different universities.

Women are underrepresented within the sport industry (Acosta & Carpenter, 2012). As previously stated, Jones and Brooks (2008) found that women are underrepresented in sport management programs. The participants in our study were quite aware of their underrepresentation as women in the field and expressed various issues and concerns regarding this. The perception that men dominate sport was found to give the impression that sport is not a viable education and/or career option for women (Tiell, 2002). This finding is consistent with research that revealed gender disparity in certain academic majors is due to women's tending to perceive them as dominated by men (Jacobs, 1986; Lackland & De Lisi, 2001; Solnick, 1995). The negative perception female students had is something sport management educators should be aware of and addressing with both male and female students.

A chilly climate has been described as a male-dominated educational environment that hinders women's entrance or performance in a particular field (Hall & Sandler, 1982). Results from this study suggest that a chilly climate does exist for female sport management students in their interactions with male peers. Several focus group participants indicated negative experiences due to the underrepresentation of women within the program and described specific situations and/or environments as "challenging," "stressful," "hard," or "frustrating." Participants also noted experiencing negative gender stereotypes during interactions with male peers.

A postgraduate degree seems to facilitate the entrance and advancement of women in sport. More than half of focus group participants reported a lack of readily available post-graduate information. Focus group participants expressed concerns about the lack of available information on whether a given sport employer requires a candidate to hold an advanced degree, postgraduate degrees applicable to employment in the sport industry (e.g., sport management, business), and which universities offer the best-regarded postgraduate degrees. These findings suggested that graduating female sport management students striving to find employment in sport and who are unaware of the importance of postgraduate degrees would likely be at a disadvantage in a competitive job market.

### **Recommendations**

Findings from the participants in this study provide a basis for several suggestions to increase the knowledge of the sport management degree among potential female students in order to address their underrepresentation. First and foremost, college sport management administrators and faculty should strive to educate high school counselors on the existence and benefits of sport management programs for both genders. Second, sport management administrators and faculty are encouraged to promote the program among female high school students (e.g., scholarship/financial aid opportunities, college-campus and department-specific field trips, guest speaking). Furthermore, with the majority of focus group participants indicating a delayed transfer into the sport management program, sport management administration and faculty should promote the program to college counselors as a possibility for female students having the aptitude and interest. Lastly, sport management faculty should initiate opportunities to better promote the program among undecided female college students (e.g., through scholarship/financial aid opportunities, department/classroom tours, mentoring programs with upper-level students). This could be accomplished through sport management presence at high school college nights, web information, and major fairs at universities.

Sport management professors and administrators must address the chilly climate to increase the representation of women in sport management education and professions. An initial recommendation is that the concept of the chilly climate be further researched and explored in the field of sport management. Additionally, research indicates environments perceived to be male-dominated are more likely to result in a lack of social support for women. We suggest that female sport management students elicit the assistance of sport management faculty or that sport management faculty form support groups to encourage females in the major. A chilly climate for female students or any other underrepresented groups in sport management programs is unacceptable. Other fields in academia, including the STEM disciplines have done extensive research on the chilly climate. It is important that the field of sport management conduct further studies and address this issue.

Findings from this study suggest that female sport management students' perceptions of sport management as male-dominated may be discouraging women from entering that field. We recommend that sport management experts encourage the formation of a nationwide female sport management task force or association comprised of female industry leaders, faculty, and students that would strive to promote gender equality and increase the presence of women in sport management programs nationwide. The North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM) or Women in NASSM (WIN) may provide a viable avenue for such an endeavor. The task force would be responsible for marketing sport management academic programs among female high school students and provide opportunities for current female college students to network with female role models in the industry. As opportunities for female sport management students to network with other women increase, the perception of a chilly climate may decrease and in return increase the number of women interested in sport.

Sport management administrators are encouraged to review the way in which post-graduate information is compiled and offer more comprehensive information about the various schools offering a sport-specific program. Additionally, it is suggested that the North American Society for Sport Management (NASSM) website be more comprehensive and accessible and include applicable postgraduate information such as the benefits of continuing one's education, the importance of postgraduate degrees to securing jobs within sport, the various types of post-graduate degrees, the various programs offering postgraduate degrees, and financial aid and scholarship opportunities for students wishing to continue their education.

### **Limitations**

This study only included only undergraduate female students at one university. In the future, we would recommend expanding the participant number, including male students, as well as increasing the geographic diversity of where information is obtained. Further, considering only undergraduate students were included in this study, it would be interesting to include graduate level students. Additionally, it would be interesting to expand this line of research to include international female sport management undergraduate students considering this study was limited to US students. Lastly, only one African American female participated in this study. We recommend conducting this study with more ethnic or racial minority students as we cannot assume experiences would be similar. We cannot generalize our findings to all sport management students.

Bias is a concern in any study related to perceptions and opinions regarding future events. Though we took steps to address bias, we are inherently aware that the researchers of the study all work in the field and bring our own perceptions and biases to the study. We utilized

transcription, direct quotes, thick description, member checking, and notes to ensure accuracy of participants' response.

## Conclusion

The findings for our study indicated the underrepresentation of female sport management students may be influenced by a combination of variables. These variables should be examined further as they have implications for various parties including high school counselors, sport management faculty and higher education administrators. Further, the findings could have implications for the academic major of sport management and the female sport management students in programs. As previously noted by scholars, it is important to continue to not overlook and to study the educational experiences of those in sport management as we continue to explore the underrepresentation of women working in sport.

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