Intentional Design of Graduate Assistantships as

Learning Experiences for Competency Development:

A Content Analysis of Graduate Assistantship Postings in the

Field of Collegiate Recreation

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If asked to describe the most basic requirement for an entry-level professional position in the field of collegiate recreation, many would start with a statement such as: “Two years of experience and a masters degree in a related field.” Certainly, there are exceptions to this industry standard but to confidently search for employment in this increasingly professional field an individual needs not only the academic degree, but two years of work experience in the field as well. One could go about gaining both work experience and a relevant master’s degree in a number of different ways (internships for example). However, the common path is to complete a two year graduate assistantship which nicely pairs paraprofessional work experience in a recreation department with a degree at the same university in a related field. Structurally, this seems to be an ideal development system for burgeoning professionals. This study examines the extent in which these assistantships are intentionally designed in conjunction with the graduate student’s degree program to provide development opportunity in each of the eight professional competencies as defined by NIRSA (Core Competencies (NIRSA)).

The duality of a graduate assistantship being rooted in both an academic and work experience is at the core of this study. If our industry’s goal is to maximize the assistantship as a development opportunity for would be professionals in our field, then it makes sense to ensure that the academic experience and work experience are efficiently moving graduate students towards these critical competencies. If the assistantship and degree program are unnecessarily duplicating the development of certain competency areas and neglecting others, we are falling short as an industry. As impacting the curriculum and availability of certain degree programs is not so easily achieved for recreation professionals, it is more reasonable to examine the design of graduate assistant work experiences and intentionally design a position description that most effectively provides development opportunities for the student while still meeting the functional needs of the department.

**Review of Literature**

The importance of having a clearly defined set of competencies for success is not unique to the field of collegiate recreation. Researchers have examined competencies for the related fields of student affairs administration in higher education as well as various areas within sports management. In regards to student affairs administration, these competencies have become clearly defined and are recognized by a unifying national organization. The academic discipline of sports management covers a vast scope of the sports industry and as such each individual area of the field has its own twist on core competencies.

In 1949, Wrenn and Darley first identified that “the application of standards for selection and training” was one of eight critical components for identifying student affairs work as a profession. At the time, they deemed that these standards were not present and that student affairs was not an identifiable profession. The field was re-assessed twice in the 1980’s (Stamatakos, 1981) (Bloland & Stamatakos, 1989) with the same conclusion.

The first gathering of what would become the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) occurred in 1979 and marked a significant step towards an accepted set of standards for which to measure work in student affairs. Building off of those early efforts to formalize their field as a profession, the Association for College Personnel Administrators (ACPA) and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) have joined forces to publish a set of Competency Areas for Student Personnel Practitioners (2010). According to their work, professionals in this field would demonstrate competency in

* advising and helping;
* assessment, evaluation, and research;
* equity, diversity, and inclusion;
* ethical professional practice;
* history, philosophy, and values;
* human and organizational resources;
* law, policy, and governance;
* leadership;
* personal foundations; and
* student learning and development (ACPA & NASPA, 2010).

As previously mentioned, the landscape of defining competencies for industries related to the field of sports management is much more diverse. This is evident by the research conducted on competency identification for sports facility managers (Case & Branch, 2003), fitness club instructors (Change & Kim, 2003; Koustelios, 2003), sport club managers in Germany (Horch & Shutte, 2003), public parks and recreation professionals (Hurd, 2005), private club managers (Koenigsfeld, 2007), basketball coaches (Phillips & Jubenville, 2009; Kostopoulos, 2011), sales and marketing professionals in the sport industry (Bae & Miller, 2011), track and field coaches (Stavropoulos, Kipreos, Tripolitsioti, Strigas, 2012), and athletic directors (Woo & Hwang, 2012). These research studies and others on the core competencies of recreational sport administrators (Barcelona & Ross, 2004) and entry level professionals, graduate assistants, and student employees in collegiate recreation (Schneider, Stier, Kampf, Haines & Wilding, 2006) demonstrate the growing professionalism of the sport, recreation, and fitness fields. Broadly, these core competencies for sport, recreation, and fitness professionals include

* management and leadership;
* technical and programming;
* administrative; and
* theory and Research skills.

Similar to and often in conjunction with student affairs and sports management, researchers in collegiate recreation have grappled with the concept of finding a professional identity for their field. Dr. William Wasson pioneered efforts to progressively pursue professional standards when he founded the National Intramural Association (History (NIRSA)) which has gone through several identity changes but now operates under the name NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation and is known simply as NIRSA. Throughout the organization’s journey towards professionalization of the collegiate recreation industry, the various name changes and re-focusing of the organization’s mission are indicative of this struggle to reach consensus on what it means to be a collegiate recreation professional. Are we professionals in the sport industry that happen to work in higher education or are we professionals of student affairs work in higher education that just happen to focus on sports and recreation? The answer, as evidenced by the stated core competencies for NIRSA professionals (Core Competencies (NIRSA)), seems to be that both are true. These core competencies include

* philosophy and theory;
* programming;
* human resources management;
* business management;
* facility management, planning, and design;
* research and evaluation;
* legal liability and risk management; and,
* personal and professional qualities (Core Competencies (NIRSA))

Of the eight listed competencies several of them align with the lists from ACPA and NASPA guiding student affairs work and several align with the various competencies identified in the various areas of the sports industry mentioned previously. In short, to be successful in NIRSA, you must be both an effective educator as well as proficient in sport industry practices.

With the establishment of the NIRSA Registry and the associated competencies, collegiate recreation now meets Wrenn and Darley’s (1949) requirement for “the application of standards for selection and training”. They are, in most cases, general competencies that apply to all management positions in recreational sports and are targeted at entry level as well as seasoned professionals. Thus, it can be argued that these core competencies should be included in professional as well as pre-professional or graduate assistantship postings. These core competencies were developed in part to encourage collegiate recreational sports professionals to continue their professional development over the course of their careers. As important as this system of self directed learning and advancement is for industry professionals it is important to consider the implication of the competencies when facilitating the intentional design of a graduate assistant’s work experience in your department. If it is an expectation that young professionals in the field have skills in each of the eight competencies, then it should be expected that the environment that our graduate assistants work in is expanding proficiencies in those eight areas.

Thankfully, willing partners exist in our graduate faculty for the shaping of learning experiences for our graduate assistants. If our goal is to develop these students and emerging professionals in the eight competency areas it is critical to examine which competencies are already being covered in their graduate programs. For the purpose of examining this further we are working on the assumption that most graduate assistants pursuing a career in collegiate recreation are in academic disciplines similar to either sports management or student affairs in higher education. As there are very few degree programs that specifically address preparation for collegiate recreation students seem to choose one of these two options as the most relatable. By exploring the curricula of graduate programs in these two areas it can be determined which competencies will be addressed effectively in the classroom and which may need to be intentionally reinforced through the assistantship experience. If you have graduate assistants in other programs it would be equally or perhaps more critical that you examine which of the eight state core competencies in the NIRSA Registry are covered by their academic program.

The Council for Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has established a detailed list of expectations for what they refer to as “Masters-Level Student Affairs Professional Preparation Programs” (CAS, 2012). As a guiding force for developing curriculum requirements for related academic programs this document is being used to offer insight to which of the eight NIRSA competencies are likely being addressed in student affairs related graduate programs. The document lists three basic curriculum requirements, each with their own sub categories and descriptors. Those three basic requirements are (a) foundational studies, (b) professional studies and (c) supervised practice. By mapping these requirements to each of the eight NIRSA competencies we learn that while students in these programs will gain significant experience with: human resources management; research and evaluation; programming techniques and practices; philosophy and theory; and development of personal and professional qualities. However, this same mapping exercises shows that a student affairs graduate program will likely not address business procedures, facility management and planning or legal liability and risk management issues in significant detail.

The Commission on Sports Management Accreditation (COSMA) offers program specific accreditation for undergraduate, graduate and doctoral level programs in sports management. Their 2010 accreditation principles and self study preparation document identifies seven “common professional components” (COSMA, 2010). Those components are: (a) social, psychological and international; (b) sports management principles; (c) ethics in sports management; (d) sports marketing and communication; (e) finance, accounting and economics; (f) legal aspects; and (g) integrative experience. Mapping these seven components to the NIRSA competencies indicates that students in these programs would be well versed in business procedures, legal liability and risk management and philosophy and theory. The following areas may need to receive some extra attention as part of the assistantship experience: facility management, planning and design; human resources managementt, research and evaluation, personal and professional qualities; and programming.

A notable part of the COSMA accreditation process for a master’s program is that of the 30 credit hours required only half of those credit hours are required to be offered through the sports management program (2010). The other 15 credit hours can be electives as defined by the program or the students. This considerable flexibility would allow for a graduate assistant to intentionally address some of the educational gaps through focusing their electives on higher education administration coursework or even business management practices that would tailor their degree towards the NIRSA competencies.

By understanding which NIRSA competencies are either adequately or inadequately developed through the graduate program that graduate assistants are enrolled in we can intentionally design assistantship experiences that ensure each of the eight listed areas are addressed. The implications of successfully designing and mapping a graduate assistantship to the NIRSA competencies touch our collegiate recreation on both local and more global levels. The advancement of our field towards a solidly defined profession would certainly be bolstered by the intentional development of an assistantship based on these set standards. More locally, the graduate assistants in your department will have a more active role in their development and should certainly be better prepared for a successful transition into a professional position.

With the successful transition of graduate assistants to profession positions as a priority, it is critical to understand how working towards competency development may give these students and advantage. The NIRSA core competencies are said to be relevant at most if not all stages of our professional careers. However, as several researchers have found, at different levels of professional development one or more of these competencies is emphasized over the others (Barcelona, 2004; Barcelona & Ross, 2004; Schneider, et al., 2006).  Knowing where recreational sports administrators’ place this emphasis would be helpful to students seeking these positions as well as “…ensur[ing] that all those involved in hiring focus on the same elements and ask questions that are competency based rather than education and job history based” (p. 47, Hurd, 2005).

Schneider, et al. (2006) focused on the characteristics, attributes, and competencies of new hires for professional positions, graduate assistantships, and student employee positions. They surveyed campus recreation directors using an 18 item questionnaire with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = irrelevant to 5 = essential).  For graduate assistantships the top five characteristics, attributes, and competencies deemed “important” to “very important” were: 1) neat overall appearance (4.10); 2) excellent language/speaking skills (3.99); 3) excellent writing skills (3.72); 4) prior experience in campus recreation (3.65); and, 5) CPR certification (3.64) [p. 150, Schneider, et al.]. Interestingly, the top five characteristics, attributes, and competencies for new professionals were strikingly similar: 1) excellent language/speaking skills (4.38); 2) prior experience in campus recreation (4.33); 3) neat overall appearance (4.29); 4) excellent writing skills (4.24); and, 5) possession of graduate degree (4.10) [p. 150].  In both cases, campus recreation directors rated CRSS certification as “irrelevant” to “not very important” (1.58) for graduate assistant positions or “not very important” for newly hired professionals (2.35) [p. 150]. The researchers concluded from their results that overall campus recreation directors “…value job applicants at all levels who have excellent communication skills and prior experience in campus recreation” (p. 152, Schneider, et al., 2006).

In light of Schneider et al.’s (2006) findings and Hurd’s (2005) contention that hiring questions should be focused on competencies rather than education and job history it is particularly relevant to examine NIRSA’s stated set of core competencies and for recreational sports professionals to analyze if these competencies are listed in graduate assistantship postings. If graduate assistant position descriptions are void of or lacking evidence that the core competencies will be developed through the assistantship it serves to ensure that our graduate students will have a confused perspective on what skills are critical for success in this field. Thus, it can be argued that these core competencies should be included in professional as well as pre-professional or graduate assistantship postings. Further, the relative importance of each of these eight core competencies may vary according to each program area since graduate assistants are typically hired to work in one specific program area. NIRSA refers to these program areas as communities of practice.

**Methodology**

With a primary goal of examining competency development for graduate assistants in the field of collegiate recreation it was determined that a content analysis of assistantship position postings would yield impactful data. While a content analysis is most often used as a means of coding interpersonal and mass media communications, Krippendorff (1989) clarified that “Anything that occurs in sufficient numbers and has reasonably stable meanings for a specific group of people may be subject to a content analysis.” In this case it was determined that our data set of graduate assistant postings was large enough to confidently represent the field of collegiate recreation. In addition, the language, format and somewhat standardized approach to posting a position opening within this field are widely known and recognized, or “stable” as Krippendorff stated, by professionals in this field.

This method of data collection is further supported in precedence by similar work conducted in the field of library sciences. In their 2014 work, “Competencies and Responsibilities of Social Science Data Librarians: An Analysis of Job Descriptions, Xia and Wang used a content analysis to measure the then current status of responsibilities and required competencies for professionals in quickly changing field. Their approach was highly quantitative and involved processes they referred to as “text grouping and tag clouding” (Xia & Wang, 2014). Essentially, they identified a very specific set of words that they believed reflected evidence of various predetermined competencies and then used a software program to count how often those words were used in their data set of position descriptions. Their process increased the scientific rigor of the study as using software to count specific words is highly reliable. As Krippendorff (1989) put it, “Human coders tend to be unreliable but at interpreting semantically complex texts.” Siegfried Kracauer (1952-1953) discussed the ways in which many content analysis approaches use aspects of both qualitative and quantitative methods to achieve scientifically relevant results but allow for researcher interpretation when needed. With a desire to allow for contextual interpretation it was determined that a quantitative tally system would be used by a human conduct the content analysis.

The data set that was analyzed for this study were position postings for graduate assistantships in the field of collegiate recreation. Efforts were made to ensure that the collection of position postings was accurately representative of all of the graduate assistantship positions that exist in the field. While there are a number of ways for collegiate recreation programs to post graduate assistant positions the most common method is a web based posting on bluefishjobs.com, the career opportunity arm of NIRSA. Following a request for data, NIRSA agreed to partner with this study and provided a comprehensive database of every graduate assistantship that was posted on bluefishjobs.com for the calendar year between August 1st, 2013 and July 31st, 2014. There was no sampling process employed in this study as every available posting was included in the data set for analysis.

As part of the posting process on bluefishjobs.com, hiring institutions must indicate what type of position they are posting which allowed the data to be easily filtered by “graduate assistant”. Additionally, the fields of “position description” and “requirements” were fields to be completed in the posting process. This systematic process for listing positions on the website provided an highly consistent set of data as it encouraged individuals to post similar information about each position regardless of their institution or personal preferences. As an added measure of validity, each posting was reviewed and only verified as graduate assistantships if they included both a stipend and graduate tuition remission as remuneration for a part time employment commitment. To clarify, if a position only included a stipend or hourly wage as remuneration this position was not included in our data set as it was not viewed as a co-curricular experience as we have defined a graduate assistantship.

The initial set included 255 position postings for the time frame listed. These postings were from 173 different colleges and universities across the United States and Canada. For the purpose of further narrowing future implications of this study those 255 postings were categorized into seven different communities of practice, or areas of specialization, within the field of collegiate recreation. NIRSA currently identifies 14 communities of practice but six of the 14 areas of specialization were not significantly represented in the position postings provided in the data set. The communities of practice that were represented in the data set include: aquatics; facilities; fitness; intramural sports; marketing; outdoor recreation; and sport clubs. An additional category, not listed in the NIRSA communities of practice, was added after consulting with NIRSA staff. This area, competitive sports, represents a combination of intramural sports and sport clubs into one combined area of specialization. This category was added on the basis that a significant number of postings listed competitive sports as the area of specialization and is reflective of a trend in the industry to combine intramural sports and sport clubs into one functional area.

Position descriptions that were either not affiliated to one of the communities of practice, were and outlier in that there were only one or two positions in the given are or that combined two different communities of practice into one position were excluded from the study. In total, 28 positions were removed from data set as they did not fit into one of the eight included specializations. In addition 34 of the position postings were incomplete and only listed the announcement of an opening with a link to the hiring institution’s website. These postings were also removed from the data set due to lack of valid information to analyze. Table 1 represents the eight communities of practice and the respective number of postings to be included in our content analysis. Once identified and sorted, the postings were organized into a spreadsheet with different tabs for each community of practice. Each posting included information under the fields of institution name, position title, position description and requirements. Presumably to save of fees that are assessed per posting on the website, some institutions included two different positions in the same posting. When this occurred, the data for each position posting was separated an included as an individual posting in the respective sheet for its affiliated community of practice.

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| Table 1. Number of and Percentage Postings Per NIRSA Community of Practice | |
| NIRSA community of practice | Number of postings on bluefishjobs.com (8/1/13 – 7/31/14) |
| Aquatics | 25 (13%) |
| Competitive Sports | 24 (12%) |
| Facilities | 35 (18%) |
| Fitness | 35 (18%) |
| Intramural Sports | 29 (15%) |
| Marketing | 10 (5%) |
| Outdoor Recreation | 22 (11%) |
| Sport Clubs | 13 (7%) \*Percentages are out of 193 total postings in final data set |

To establish a valid instrument and analysis procedure care was given to ensure the reliability of both. To the benefit of this process, NIRSA has established a highly detailed list of core competencies for professionals in the field. First appearing on the organization’s website in 2014 these eight competencies have been developed to reflect not only, specific sub-categories as well as a rubric of “levels” that indicate various skills that should be evident for professionals that have basic, intermediate or advanced skill sets in the various competencies. These industry established competencies and specific sub-categories (71 across eight competency areas) served as the objective basis for the measuring instrument. The procedure of the content analysis would become a exercise in mapping the various responsibilities and requirements in the position postings to the specific competency sub-categories that they aligned with. Please see Appendix item A for a complete list of the competencies and their respective sub-categories of skill sets.

To ensure that the analysis or coding procedure was as reliable and scientifically rigorous as can be expected with a human coder efforts were made to first establish a consistent coding approach as well as establish intrarater reliability. To establish a sustainable and consistent approach for coding researches sought to clarify the definitions of the various competency sub-categories within the context of the language and format of the position postings. With this in mind five individual postings, each representing a different community of practice were pulled from the data set for analysis. Three separate researchers conducted independent content analysis of the five postings. The researchers included a director of a collegiate recreation department, an assistant director in collegiate recreation and a tenured faculty member in the field of sport management. Using the instrument and the described mapping process, a tally was marked in each subcategory that the researcher believed was reflected by skills listed in the position description or the candidate requirements.

Once completed the three independent sets of results were compiled and the three researchers met to discuss their coding experiences, discuss areas of congruence and clarify areas of difference. Although this process would typically be used to establish the *inter*rater reliability, in this case the focus of the discussion was reaching agreement on examples of words, phrases or concepts that could be consistently mapped or coded to a specific sub-category of a competency. By reaching agreement on how so many of these regularly occurring skills would be coded in the instrument the researcher conducting the content analysis of the complete data set could more confidently and consistently discern which sub-category a given skill could be assigned to. It was also determined in this process that the previously created instrument was effective and would support the researcher in maintaining a consistent approach to the analysis.

Using the instrument all 227 position postings in the data set were reviewed via the content analysis by one researcher. It was during this process that 34 of the position postings were deemed to be incomplete and were removed from the data set, resulting in the final number of 193 postings. Starting alphabetically with all of the postings in “aquatics” and finishing with all of the postings in “sport clubs” each posting was systematically reviewed with a “1” being placed in a spreadsheet for every sub-category that was represented in the respective position posting. This analysis took place over four separate sessions with intentional breaks scheduled to support a consistent level of focus and commitment to accuracy of the analysis. One day following the completion of the initial content analysis of all 193 postings, five postings were selected at random for an independent secondary review by the same researcher that conducted the initial study. This was done as a test measure for intrarater reliability and resulted in a 96% accuracy rating between the two separate analyses.

Within each community of practice a total was compiled for each competency sub-category which indicates how many position postings in that specialization reflected that the given sub-category would be experienced if working in that position. For example, the Aquatics community of practice included 25 total position postings and 11 of those postings listed “verbal / written communication” as a responsibility or a requirement. That total (11) will also be converted into a percentage (44%) of the total postings in that area. The percentage allows comparison to the relative importance of that competency sub-category to the various communities of practice. In addition the totals in each sub-category will be compiles into one industry wide total and respective percentage. The complete breakdown of all of these totals and percentages can be reviewed in detail in Appendix A. For the purpose of framing results, sub-categories will be reported as significant (61-100%), moderate (11 – 60%) or insignificant (0-10%)

Although the defined data set included every graduate assistant posting listed on bluefishjobs.com for one calendar year, there are some potential limitations to the data set. First, there is no requirement that collegiate recreation departments post their positions on this website. For various reasons related to individual or institutional choice, hiring departments may choose to post the positions on their institutional website only, use their network as a way to spread the word about the opening or perhaps only list the position internally for previously accepted graduate students. In addition, graduate assistantships are generally a two year commitment so a given position would likely on be posted on an every other year schedule. It is reasonable to project that this data set only represents one half of the total positions available at NIRSA affiliated institutions. There are also limiting factors related to the use of one human researcher for the content analysis. With one researcher the interpretation of the content in the postings is subject to the experience, knowledge and inferences of that given person.

**Results**

Results of this study and the subsequent data have relevance to the industry of collegiate recreation as a whole as well as for each individual community of practice as defined by NIRSA. The percentage of positions available in each individual community of practice as a stand-alone statistic is indicative of the number of opportunities that exist to earn graduate assistantships in the field. For the purposes of addressing the research question the primary focus the results will be related to the industry as a whole in regards to which competency areas are most effectively experienced through collegiate recreation graduate assistantships. With the design of this study it will also be clearly evident how assistantships in each specific community of practice are preparing students in each competency area.

NIRSA describes the competency area of philosophy and theory as “…knowledge and skills that connect the philosophy and theory to professional practice.” (Core Competencies (NIRSA)). An examination of the industry wide data points to “standards of practice” being the only significantly represented sub-category in this competency area. See Table 2.1 for specific totals and percentages. The most common reason for positions being aligned with these two sub-categories was that they required some sort of industry specific certification. The remaining seven sub-categories in this competency area were all in-significant as they were represented in less than 10% of the positions.

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| **Table 2.1** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Philosophy / Theory** | Total | % |
| Standards of Practice | 121 | 63% |
| Trends in Recreational Sports | 68 | 35% |

Programming is the competency area with the largest number of sub-categories and NIRSA believes that “Program delivery to our communities is a core purpose for collegiate recreation professionals…” (Core Competencies (NIRSA)). Although none of the 14 sub-categories reached our significant level of greater than 60%, program development, teaching and training, scheduling, promoting, delivery and leadership were evident in a moderate number of the positions. See Table 2.2 for specific totals and percentages. One of the reasons for such a large number of the sub-categories being represented by this competency area is that both the development of staff training as well as recreational programs themselves were considered programs. Still, eight sub-categories were represented in less than 10% of the positions.

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| **Table 2.2** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Programming** |  |  |
| Program Development | 104 | 54% |
| Teaching and Training | 91 | 47% |
| Scheduling | 89 | 46% |
| Promoting | 85 | 44% |
| Delivery | 76 | 39% |
| Leadership | 26 | 13% |

When stretched slightly to include the management of student employees, human resource management becomes one of the cornerstone experiences for graduate assistants in collegiate recreation. For the purposes of their professional registry (competencies) NIRSA qualifies that supervision of student employees generally is included only in the basic level of competency in this area. Still both personnel / human resource management and staff selection and training qualify as being significant to the graduate assistant experience as they are represented in over 80% of positions. A common phrase found in many of the position postings that encompasses both areas is “…assist in the hiring, training and evaluation of student staff.” See Table 2.3 for specific totals and percentages. Expectedly, more advanced concepts such as organizational development and governance structures are represented in less than 5% of the positions.

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| **Table 2.3** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Human Resource Management** |  |  |
| Personnel / Human Resource Management | 174 | 90% |
| Staff Selection and Training | 162 | 84% |
| Customer Service (Internal and External) | 44 | 23% |
| Staff /Student Development | 41 | 21% |

As a competency area, business management is not a highly significant part of the graduate assistant experience in collegiate recreation. While 54% of the positions state a need for verbal / written communication skills this seems to be a more an afterthought bullet that is added to every list of requirements as it rarely appeared in the responsibilities listed in the position description. Still it is clear that with the moderate level of representation of not only communication but policy development and implementation, public relations and marketing as well as budgeting and resource allocation it is clear that assistantships are exposing students to the business side of the industry. Please reference Table 2.4 for specific totals and percentages. A notable omission is that not one position indicated the importance of sustainability as a critical component.

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| **Table 2.4** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Business Management** |  |  |
| Verbal / Written Communication | 105 | 54% |
| Policy Development and Implementation | 59 | 31% |
| Public Relations and Marketing | 56 | 29% |
| Budgeting and Resource Acquisition | 47 | 24% |

In their definition of facility management, planning and design NIRSA points to the recent trend of facility and expansion, indication that it “…covers a broad scope of skill sets needed to successfully operate, maintain and plan new attractive, safe and fully operable built environments.” (Core Competencies (NIRSA)). With facilities being a specific community of practice one could accurately assume that this specific competency area is very prominent in that specialization. Many assistantships develop individuals in the sub-categories of facility operations and management, event management and equipment and supplies. If for no other reason, many of the postings indicated that the graduate assistants regardless of their specialization would be assisting with facility supervision and special events. See Appendix A for a breakdown across all specializations and Table 2.5 for the totals on the most commonly represented sub-categories in this competency area.

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| **Table 2.5** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Facility Management / Planning / Design** |  |  |
| Facility Operations and Management | 104 | 54% |
| Event Management | 100 | 52% |
| Equipment and Supplies | 86 | 45% |

In their definition of research and evaluation NIRSA indicates that “As a profession, collegiate recreation must continue generating research that increase knowledge that advances the profession.” (Core Competencies (NIRSA)) While this competency is critical, it does seem that the graduate assistant positions have not yet caught up to this trend. Only one of the sub-categories, program assessment, is represented by more than 10% of the positions. The remaining six sub-categories in this competency area seem largely neglected with the notable exception marketing which referenced assessment and evaluations in 40% of their position descriptions. Table 2.6 depicts the only sub-category of significance in this area.

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| **Table 2.6** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Research / Evaluation** |  |  |
| Program Assessment | 67 | 35% |

The mere mention of the competency area legal liability and risk management is enough to make any director or university administrator tighten up and pay attention. As NIRSA warns in their description of this competency area, “…the litigious nature of our society, collegiate recreation professionals must be able to identify and manage risks.” Perhaps that is why 35% of the industry wide position postings referenced responsibilities in risk management. There are notable discrepancies between communities of practice in this competency however with several demonstrating that nearly 60% of their positions require this competency while less than 25% of other specializations require it. Perhaps the most concerning statistic in the entire data set is that only 15 positions or 8% of all of the positions indicated responsibility or knowledge of an emergency action plan or as the sub-category is titled, crisis management. See table 2.7 for a breakdown of all five sub-categories in this area.

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| **Table 2.7** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Legal Liability / Risk Management** |  |  |
| Risk Management | 68 | 35% |
| Crisis Management | 15 | 8% |
| Sports Waivers and Consent | 7 | 4% |
| Insurance Coverage and Plans | 2 | 1% |
| Legal Process | 0 | 0% |

In comparison to the other competency areas, personal / professional qualities might be the most difficult to measure as it is comprised almost entirely of soft skills. That may be why not one of the nine sub-categories is evident in more than 10% of the position postings across the industry. The two most notable areas that are evident from this competency are prioritization and equity, diversity and inclusion which both appeared in roughly 10% of the postings. Table 2.8 shows that nearly 20 of the 193 total positions mentions the need for these qualities in a successful graduate assistant.

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| **Table 2.8** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| **Personal / Professional Qualities** |  |  |
| Prioritization | 19 | 10% |
| Equity, Diversity and Inclusion | 18 | 9% |

Table 2.9A illustrates the top ten sub-categories as reflected by the industry wide data set.

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| **Table 2.9A** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| Personnel / Human Resource Management | 174 | 90% |
| Staff Selection and Training | 162 | 84% |
| Standards of Practice | 121 | 63% |
| Verbal / Written Communication | 105 | 54% |
| Program Development | 104 | 54% |
| Facility Operations and Management | 104 | 54% |
| Event Management | 100 | 52% |
| Teaching and Training | 91 | 47% |
| Scheduling | 89 | 46% |
| Equipment and Supplies | 86 | 45% |

Table 2.9B shows the opposite end of the spectrum, highlighting all of the sub-categories that were reflected in less than five percent of the industry wide data set of 193 reviewed position postings.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 2.9B** | Industry – Wide 193 Positions | |
| CAS Standards for Recreational Sports Perspectives | 0 | 0% |
| Health and Wellness Theories and Models | 0 | 0% |
| Service | 0 | 0% |
| Administrative / Executive Leadership Development | 0 | 0% |
| Debt Mgmt, Financing, Building Reserves, Revenue Gen & Dev | 0 | 0% |
| Sustainable Communities | 0 | 0% |
| Facility Planning and Design | 0 | 0% |
| Legal Process | 0 | 0% |
| Networking | 0 | 0% |
| Service | 0 | 0% |
| Learning Outcomes | 1 | 1% |
| Resources | 1 | 1% |
| Sustainability | 1 | 1% |
| Global Perspective | 1 | 1% |
| Organizational Development | 1 | 1% |
| Governance Structures | 1 | 1% |
| Organization | 1 | 1% |
| Participation-Based Philosophical Perspectives | 2 | 1% |
| Facility Life Cycling (Maintenance, Renewal, Enhancement) | 2 | 1% |
| Vendors | 2 | 1% |
| Insurance Coverage and Plans | 2 | 1% |
| Adaptability | 2 | 1% |
| Global Perspective | 2 | 1% |
| Student Affairs Issues and Theories | 3 | 2% |
| Health and Wellbeing | 4 | 2% |
| Ethical Behavior | 4 | 2% |
| Student Development Theory | 5 | 3% |
| Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion | 5 | 3% |
| Applies Recreational Sports Research | 5 | 3% |
| Analytical Skills | 6 | 3% |
| Equity and Diversity | 7 | 4% |
| Sports Waivers and Consent | 7 | 4% |
| Dissemination of Results | 10 | 5% |
| Problem Solving | 10 | 5% |
| Health and Wellbeing | 10 | 5% |

**Conclusions**

The data presented in this study points directly to question of whether or not collegiate recreation is effectively preparing its graduate assistants in accordance with the industry defined core competencies. Simply from a numbers standpoint, it is clear that some specific skills are developed in a rather uniform fashion across the industry. Most notably, graduate assistants in the field have the opportunity to practice student staff supervision regardless of their specific community of practice or the type of institution they are at. In addition, it seems that many of our graduate assistants are invited to gain experience in facility operations through night and weekend supervision requirements. Similarly, about half of our graduate assistants can hone their program development skills through their position in the department. It is concerning however that only seven of the 71 competency sub-categories were represented in more than 50 percent of the position postings. Of even greater concern is that 37 of the 71 sub-categories were represented by 20 or less (roughly 10 percent) of the position postings. This statistic strongly supports that there are significant gaps in the development opportunities that graduate assistants have as related to the established core competencies.

As it was not the primary focus of this study, the results of the individual communities of practice were not mentioned in the data presented. However, a quick review of the appendix will reveal some competency areas that are highly evident in positions in some of the communities of practice and not in others. For example, positions in fitness are 71 percent likely to provide program development experience where this is true of only 20 percent of the facilities positions. Conversely 94 percent of facilities positions offer experience in facility operations and management where only 21 percent of competitive sports positions will offer development opportunities in this areas. A close examination of your specific community of practice and its involvement in all of the competency areas and sub-categories will paint a more relevant point of reference for the work that you are directly involved in.

Reasonable minds may point to a number of reasons for various competency areas not being represented in the graduate assistant position postings. Some of the specific competencies and sub-categories certainly lend themselves to be more likely experiences for higher level administrators. Legal processes for example may be better reserved for the work of our more experienced leaders. In addition one might argue that things such as knowledge of the CAS Standards or student development theory are better addressed in the classroom through their graduate degree. Lastly, for the purpose of this study it was assumed that the position postings were an accurate method of determining what experiences would be had by the individuals in the respective assistantship. It could be argued that the position postings cannot reasonably include all of the competency areas for which development opportunities will exist for the graduate assistant.

To each of these points, encouragement is offered. If a graduate assistantship is truly meant to be a co-curricular gateway to the professional world of collegiate recreation, it is in our interest to challenge ourselves and our graduate assistants to advance in as many of these competencies and sub-categories as is reasonable. Be careful to write intentional and thorough position descriptions for these assistantships. The position postings are the first impression that our interested undergraduate students, curious higher education colleagues and peers in the field have of the work and learning experiences that we are designing. Imagine an ambitious and industry aware undergraduate student pulling up your position description on bluefishjobs.com and realizing that the opportunity will exist at your institution to be challenged significantly in all eight competency areas! Imagine the impact on the perceived professionalism of our field if colleagues in higher education start looking to bluefishjobs.com to gain insight into best practices in designing learning and working experiences for graduate assistants. This is a key step in establishing confidence that the NIRSA core competencies are truly representative of the professionals in our field.

Of course, the other half of a co-curricular graduate assistantship is the academic degree that is being earned. While few collegiate recreation professionals are in a place to impact the program offerings and the associated curricula that are available at your institution, the opportunity still exists to mentor or guide a graduate assistant towards holistic competency development. How often is the phrase “It doesn’t matter what degree you get, it is the assistantship that is important” used by professionals in our field when advising students on the selection of their graduate degree program? What this study tells us is that not only does the degree program matter, it is vital to the development of individuals and our profession in general. If it is an expectation that professionals in the field have competency in the knowledge and application of student development theory and that expertise does not exist among the professional staff in your department, where will that student have the opportunity to develop in that area? How often are we sending an undergraduate student that has just earned a degree in sports administration to another institution to get yet another degree in sports administration? By intentionally mapping both the competencies developed in the work experience of the assistantship with the academic experience in the classroom, potential gaps and redundancies can be identified. Once identified, these gaps can be addressed through intentionally sought out internships that will offer specific development opportunities. Redundancies can be removed by altering work responsibilities or elective courses selected when applicable.

A great first step in making an impact in the competency development of an assistantship is to map the various components of the position description to the specific competencies that will be developed through that experience. It is likely that some quick changes will make a measurable impact. Reach out to various faculty of the relevant graduate programs at your institution. By learning more about the curriculum you will be better able to guide a graduate assistant towards intentionally developmental electives and internships. Troll bluefishjobs.com for insight from colleagues. There is likely someone at your institution in Student Affairs that has some expertise in this area as well. NASPA and ACPA have been at the competency development game for over 25 years. It is an exciting time of change in collegiate recreation and for the first time the NIRSA core competencies paint a clear image of where we are headed as a field. Seize this opportunity challenge graduate assistants to their fullest potential as a collegiate recreation professional.

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