Graduate degree program strategic assessment: Leisure Studies

Mission
The Master’s degree within the Leisure Studies Graduate Program at the University of Iowa prepares leisure service professionals for placement in a variety of advanced management positions. Students in the Recreational Sport emphasis find themselves administering campus sport and recreation programs, working in Sports Information Departments, and athletics in various capacities (e.g., coaching, athletic administration, event management, etc.). Students in the Therapeutic Recreation emphasis often manage large community-based recreation programs for persons with disabilities, work in clinical and rehabilitative settings, particularly in mental health, substance abuse and eating disorder units, and in pediatric setting within Child Life programs. Finally, several of the Master’s graduates from the program have gone on to complete their Ph. D.s in related areas of study (e.g., educational administration) and have successful careers in academia, teaching and conducting research.

Admission process and criteria

- **Student demand and recruitment.** Student demand has been relatively steady since the program relocated from Health and Sport Studies into the Division of Interdisciplinary Programs, at about 20-25 applications per year. Students come to the program because they are interested in entering the leisure and sport services professions and do not have an undergraduate degree in the area. Alternatively, students who have been awarded an undergraduate degree in leisure studies (and related areas) seek to either advance their position and responsibility (e.g., management, administration, etc.) or pursue a doctoral degree in the future. Normally, the candidate visits with the Director of Graduate Studies for the program to determine the correlation between the student’s academic and professional interests and the curriculum. Some students are advised that the program is not well suited to their aspirations and directed to another graduate program when that alternative exists.

- **Criteria for selection.** The program places a greater premium on experience and sound interpersonal communications skills than most graduate programs because no matter what area of specialization the graduate enters, he/she will have to be able to work effectively with people. Sound academic performance is likewise important; the program does not admit any student who has not achieved a 3.00 undergraduate GPA. An interview with the Director of Graduate Studies and three letters of recommendation are also required for admission.

- **Success in enrolling highest quality students admitted.** The program has successfully enrolled 50%, and usually a greater percentage, of the graduate students admitted over the last five years.

- **Success in enrolling a diverse student cohort.** Six African American graduate students have been admitted or completed the program in the last five years. This figure represents over 10% of the Leisure Studies graduate student body in the last five years.

- **Financial aid commitments.** Typically, the best students receive a ¼ time TA appointment which is renewed for a second year if the student is making acceptable academic progress and has done satisfactory work as a TA. TAs teach discussion sections in courses that satisfy general education requirements in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (the Leisure Studies Program has five courses that satisfy general education requirements in two areas—social sciences and humanities). In the last academic year Leisure Studies general education courses enrolled a total of 867 undergraduates. Students have also been successful in receiving support from other service units in the university. Graduate students in the program have been successful in securing graduate assistantships from the Department of Athletics (two-three per year, plus several GAs working with athletic teams such as football), Athletic Training (two-three per year) and Recreational Services (four per year).
Program outcomes

- **Degree completion and time to degree.** The MA curriculum is designed to be completed in two years. Graduate level classes (200 and higher) are offered every other year. Intermediate level courses (100-199) are offered every year. With very few exceptions, full-time graduate students in Leisure Studies complete their degrees in two years, often ending with a professional internship placement. A few part-time students have taken longer because they are working while completing their MA degree.

- **Fellowships, awards, honors and publications.** Several of the graduate students have presented papers at professional conferences (e.g., Obrecht, Randall, Shaffer, Van Dyke, Wojtak). One graduate merit scholarship was awarded to a LSP MA student between 2004 and 2009. MA students in LSP typically have important vocational skills that are not measured by standardized criteria used to determine graduate college awards. No external funding is earmarked for LSP graduate students.

- **Placements.** Our records indicate that approximately 75% of our MA graduates have acquired a job in the profession or continued on to pursue further graduate work (Ph. D. or Law school). This figure is likely higher but we were unable to contact several of those who graduated in the last five years. Examples of job placements include university athletic administration, professional sports, college football coaching, campus recreation, municipal recreation, college athletic directors, and YMCAs.

Program characteristics

- **What is the appropriate size of the graduate degree program, given the department’s mission, its role in education of undergraduate students, as well as research; the FTE size, the composition of the faculty, and other resources available to the department?** The Program has the capacity to serve approximately 20-25 MA students.

- **How does the program compare with other similar programs?** No specific standard or method exists that compares Leisure Studies Programs to one another. One indirect measure, however, is to compare the number of students who pass the national certification exam. The national average passing rate is 74% (of applicants pass), whereas 92% University of Iowa graduates pass.

- **Brief analysis of strengths and weaknesses of graduate program.**

**Strengths:**

- Experienced faculty who are well networked.
- All tenure track faculty have established research programs and are nationally recognized in their areas of specialization. This establishes a sound basis for mentoring graduate students.
- Funding opportunities through the CLAS, Athletics and Recreational Services result in the funding of most graduate students.
- Ample opportunities for service learning (field research projects, internships, etc.).
- Closely cooperating partners that enhance graduate education through experiential learning--Several healthcare agencies in the greater Iowa City area (Oaknoll, Chatham Oaks Mental Health Facility, Pathways Respite Care, etc.), Recreation Services, Athletics, City of Iowa City Recreation Department, Iowa City/Johnson County Senior Center, Coralville Recreation Department, Cedar Rapids Recreation Department.
- Uniqueness. To the best of our knowledge, no other university in the state or curriculum within the University of Iowa prepares graduate students for managerial and leadership roles in the leisure services profession in the areas of emphasis featured within the UI’s leisure studies program. Specifically, therapeutic recreation and recreational sport management are not available anywhere else in the state. We are the only option for students interested in an athletic administration graduate program in the state.
Weaknesses:
- Not enough faculty to offer the diversity of classes and specialties that should be offered (Voelkl not replaced since she left in 2002).
- Little room for flexibility because faculty cannot teach each other’s courses. Hence, tenure track faculty are “locked” into their courses.

- Opportunities for potential growth and reorganization to improve graduate program excellence.
  Professor Lomax is currently developing a Study Abroad Program in the Philippines for leisure studies students. The purpose of the Philippines Study Abroad Program (PSAP) is to provide students in diverse programs at the University of Iowa System with opportunities to experience the Philippines’ diversity in education, economy, people, landscape, agriculture, geology, language, and culture through immersion in varying environments. The primary goals of the program is for students to discover the Philippines’ diversity as exemplified in its plethora of cultures, and physical and human geography, to work with Filipino sport administrators and professionals in their day-to-day operations, and to work on research projects with guidance from professors at the University of San Carlos, and the University of Cebu. The program’s emphasis is on research and experiencing, first hand, the Philippines’ diversity not only in people but also in landscape, plant, and biodiversity. According to the Philippines’ Department of Education, its singular mission is to “assist the Filipino child to discover his/her full potential in a child-centered and value-driven teaching-learning environment and thereby, enable him/her to create his/her own destiny in global community. We prepare him/her to become a responsible citizen and an enlightened leader who loves his/her country and is proud to be a Filipino.”

Because of our success at placing students in collegiate and professional sports management positions, we propose to expand the leisure studies graduate program by developing a Ph. D. curriculum in administration of athletics. The addition of Professor Lomax and experience of Professor Teague in conjunction with the many service learning internships our students have completed with athletic programs give us reason to believe the time is right to move forward with a proposal for a Ph. D. We would also propose two new tenure track faculty lines to achieve this goal. We estimate that about 30% of our current graduate students aspire to a career in athletic administration.

Conclusions
The Leisure Studies graduate program is efficient and effective. Almost all graduate students enrolled in the last five years (except one) have completed their degrees in a timely manner. The FTE to graduate student completion ratio for the program is 4 FTE graduate faculty and 59 MA degrees awarded in the last five years, which translates into 14.75 MA students graduated per graduate faculty member. The majority of students secure jobs in the profession following graduation. We are the only program in the state responsive to the interests of those pursuing sport and recreation management/administration careers.