

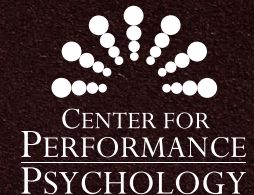
**ISSUE THIRTEEN**

**CAREER PLANNING AND TRAINING  
EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CAREER  
PROFESSIONALS IN SPORT AND  
PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY:  
A FIVE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP**

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## ABSTRACT

The early career experiences of recent graduates represent a vital data point in understanding the health of a field. Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP) has historically faced questions over the viability of employment options for its growing number of graduate students. Regular, systematic work was done to understand the work experiences, opportunities, and challenges of recent SPP graduates from 1984 through 1999 (Andersen et al., 1997; Waite & Pettit, 1993; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). Little work has been completed since this line of inquiry. Without work in this area, future professionals often begin training with little knowledge of the likelihood of their future career (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). The current study, a quantitative follow-up to previous research with graduate students, examined participants' experiences and perceptions of transitioning from graduate

school into employment. Respondents ( $n = 46$ ) reported high levels of satisfaction with their careers despite facing several obstacles. Similar to historical surveys of recent graduates, only a small percentage were doing full-time SPP work. Among doctoral graduates, 70% reported that they did any applied SPP work, and only 40% of master's graduates indicated they worked with athletes or other populations. Frustrations regarding limited market and financial support for services were expressed at similar levels to past investigations (Andersen et al., 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). The current study begins to provide data to help professionals and the field better understand the realities of beginning a career in SPP in the current climate.

Keywords: early career; career development; sport and performance psychology; graduate







## **CAREER PLANNING AND TRAINING EXPERIENCES OF EARLY CAREER PROFESSIONALS IN SPORT AND PERFORMANCE PSYCHOLOGY: AN EXPLANATORY FIVE-YEAR FOLLOW-UP**

Over the past five years, the field of Sport and Performance Psychology (SPP) has continued its advancement with the addition of a new credential (Certified Mental Performance Consultant; CMPC), an increase in the number of students in graduate training programs, and continued interest in diversifying the job market. Evidence of the latter can be seen in the growth of materials discussing the use of SPP techniques in non-sport environments (e.g., Filho et al., 2016; Fitzwater et al., 2017). Many students enter the field expressing interest in an applied career, particularly with college populations (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016) or in other competitive performance domains (Bucknell, 2015). However, there has been concern whether the job market offers viable employment opportunities for the number of interested graduates (Johnson & Andersen, 2019; Martin, 2019; Meyers et al., 2001). Preparing students for the job market is critical to the continued growth of our field; however, our understanding of the field's success in doing so is limited given the lack of research done on career development of recent graduates in SPP.

To adequately prepare future professionals for careers in SPP, it is important to regularly reflect on the training and career experiences of current students and professionals (Johnson & Andersen, 2019; Wylleman et al., 2009). Early examinations of the field in the 1990s and early 2000s found that most graduates sought employment in academia, with very few graduates working in applied positions (Andersen et al., 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). Those working reported being minimally compensated for applied sport psychology work and were more likely to do this work as an adjunctive part of their job (Williams & Scherzer, 2003). Historically, academic positions in Sport Science Departments are the most common places of employment for those interested in a full-time career (Meyers et al., 2001). This perception of limited applied career opportunities



in the field has persisted over time, as students and early career practitioners have consistently documented concern with the job market (Johnson & Andersen, 2019; Owton et al., 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016).

Studies of graduate students across fields indicate that students often feel underprepared for many professional activities expected of them in employment (e.g., Heflinger & Doykos, 2016). Fuhrmann et al. (2011) found that approximately one-third of doctoral students felt unprepared for activities related to finding a job post-graduation. In SPP, Tod et al. (2011) found that recently graduated professionals reflected positively on their training but identified gaps in their training, including counseling, psychopharmacology, case notes, and business skills.

The purpose of this study was to begin a line of longitudinal inquiry, following up with recent graduates who were surveyed five years earlier about their career goals and training experiences while still in graduate school (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). More specifically, the goal was to explore the experiences of recent graduates of master's and doctoral programs in SPP. Tracking professionals in the field over time, particularly from the beginning of their career as a graduate student through their transition into the job market, can provide insight into best practices and barriers to entry into the field.

## **METHOD**

### **PARTICIPANTS**

Individuals who participated in an earlier

study of SPP graduate students (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016), who provided contact information for follow-up projects, and who had graduated from the institution they attended at the time of the original study were the population recruited. In the previous study, there were 168 total participants, of which 110 (65.5%) provided contact information. Potential participants were contacted and asked to participate in a follow-up study aimed at gathering information about their experiences and perceptions since graduating. A total of 61 individuals began the survey. Among these responses were 15 incomplete survey attempts that were not included in the final sample ( $n = 46$ , 41.8% of individuals contacted). Although 46 participants is a small sample size, a 41.8% response rate for electronic surveys is well above the typical 10-20% response rates for internet-based surveys (Dillman, 2011). Prior to contacting participants, the study was granted IRB approval by the first author's academic institution.

### **INSTRUMENTATION**

The research team created a 68-item survey that was administered online (contact the first author for a copy of the survey). The average length of time it took participants to complete the survey was 10 minutes. Two additional professionals in the field, as well as an expert in survey design, reviewed the survey. To ensure comprehension of the items, two recent graduates who were not part of the original study participated as pilot participants. Much of the survey included modified items from the survey that the





participants completed five years prior (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016), including items about the focus of their graduate programs, their career goals during graduate school, experiences they participated in during graduate school (e.g., internships, teaching, and research), their satisfaction with these experiences, and their professional affiliations. New items queried participants about their current employment and goals for the future; demographic items were also included. To explore changes over time, many of the items were consistent with previous investigations of early-career professionals (Andersen et al., 1997; Butki & Andersen, 1994; Waite & Pettit, 1993; Williams & Scherzer, 2003; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016).

#### **DATA ANALYSIS**

The descriptive nature of this inquiry necessitated the use of descriptive statistics for most analyses. For group comparisons, the appropriate inferential statistic per variable type was employed: chi-square tests for nominal and ordinal dependent variables, and Mann-Whitney U tests for comparisons of non-parametric interval and ratio dependent variables. A significance level of  $p < .05$  was used for all inferential statistical analyses.

#### **RESULTS**

##### **DEMOGRAPHICS AND EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND**

The average age of participants was 30.15 (SD = 3.59). Twenty-seven of the participants were female (58.7%), 18 were male (39.1%), and one (2.2%) identified as gender non-

conforming. The distribution of gender among the participants was not statistically different from that of the participants in the earlier study (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016) from which the sample was drawn  $\chi^2(2, N = 206) = .924, p = .63$ . Most participants were born in the U.S. ( $n = 37, 80.4\%$ ), three (6.5%) were born in Canada, and one participant each (i.e., six participants total) was born in the following countries: Brazil, China, France, New Zealand, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. Thirty-eight individuals identified themselves as White, three as Hispanic or Latino, two as Asian, and one as Black or African American; one individual identified as both White and Hispanic or Latino.

Of the 46 individuals surveyed, 39 (84.8%) graduated from the program they attended five years prior (see Fitzpatrick et al., 2016), five (10.9%) were still enrolled at that institution, and two (4.3%) had left but did not graduate. Among those who had graduated, on average, they finished their program 22.11 months (SD = 13.46) prior to taking the current survey. A breakdown of the type of program participants graduated from can be found in Table 1. Most participants graduated with a doctoral degree ( $n = 21, 55.3\%$  of those who had graduated; five participants also received master's degrees from their program); 17 graduated with a master's degree (44.7%).

##### **CAREER PREPARATION**

Participants were asked, "How much do you believe your degree has aided you in fulfilling your initial career goal?" which was a five-point



Likert-scale item used in previous studies (Andersen et al., 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). Doctoral graduates were more likely to answer this question positively than master's graduates,  $\chi^2(4, N = 38) = 9.8, p = .044$ . Nine doctoral graduates (42.9%) responded "entirely;" 10 (47.7%) responded "mostly;" one (4.8%) each responded "somewhat" and "a little;" and none responded "not at all". Among master's graduates, two (11.8%) responded "entirely;" six (35.3%) responded "mostly;" five (29.4%) responded "somewhat;" three (17.6%) responded "a little;" and one (5.9%) responded "not at all."

#### CURRENT CAREER

Participants were asked about their current employment status. At the doctoral level, 13 (68.4%) reported working full-time for an organization; two (10.5%) were full-time self-employed; two (10.5%) were working part-time, one (5.3%) of whom was looking for full-time work, one (5.3%) of whom was not; and two (10.5%) reported "other." At the master's level, nine (52.9%) graduates reported working full-time for an organization, one (5.9%) was self-employed and working full-time, one (5.9%) was not employed but looking for full-time employment, and six (35.3%) were full-time students in doctoral programs. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the current positions of respondents who were working at the time of the study. The average salary for doctoral graduates was \$67,969.65 (SD = \$45,011.381); the median annual salary for doctoral graduates was \$60,000 (IQR = \$49,742 - \$70,000). For master's graduates, the average salary was \$41,100.00







(SD = \$18,675.30), and the median was \$43,500 (IQR = \$25,000 - \$57,000). There was a significant difference between the earnings of these two groups,  $U = 39, p = .021$ .

Of those working, 15 (75%) doctoral graduates felt that SPP had a "primary emphasis" in their current position, compared to three (30%) master's graduates. Four (20%) doctoral graduates reported that SPP had a "secondary emphasis," and one (5%) listed that there was "no SPP emphasis." One (10%) master's graduate listed that SPP had a "secondary emphasis," and six (60%) listed that there was "no emphasis." There was a significant difference between the SPP emphasis in the current positions of the two groups,  $\chi^2 (2, N = 30) = 11.23, p = .004$ . Participants were asked if they did any professional applied work with athletes or other populations. Among the doctoral graduates who were working, 14 (70%) reported that they did, and four (40%) of the master's graduates reported that they did. The median percentage of their work week that a doctoral graduate spent doing applied work was 17.5% (IQR = 10% - 88.75%) and they made 22.5% (IQR = 0% - 100%) of their income from this work. The median percentage of the work week that a master's graduate spent doing applied work was 85% (IQR = 25% - 100%), which accounted for a median of 40% of their income (IQR = 2.5% - 92.5%).

Graduates were asked about their satisfaction with their current career. At the doctoral level, seven (35%) reported being "entirely satisfied," nine (45%) were "mostly satisfied," and four (20%) were "somewhat satisfied."

None of the doctoral graduates reported being "a little satisfied" or "not satisfied at all." At the master's level, three (30%) were "entirely satisfied," five (50%) were "mostly satisfied," zero were "somewhat satisfied" one (10%) was "a little satisfied," and one (10%) was "not satisfied at all." There was no significant difference in the two groups' distributions of how satisfied they were,  $\chi^2 (4, N = 30) = 6.09, p = .193$ . Participants were also asked how difficult it had been to find a job. Among the doctoral graduates, two (14.3%) felt it was "not at all difficult," nine (64.3%) felt it was "somewhat difficult," three (21.4%) felt it was "difficult," and zero felt it was "very difficult." Among the master's graduates, zero felt it was "not at all difficult," three (33.3%) felt it was "somewhat difficult," no one felt it was "difficult," and six (66.7%) felt it was "very difficult." There was a significant difference in how difficult participants felt it was to find a job,  $\chi^2 (3, N = 23) = 13.55, p = .004$ . Correlations were run to assess the relationship between participants' number of internship hours, satisfaction with their internship experiences, SPP emphasis in their current work, satisfaction in their current career, career satisfaction, percent of income from applied work, and current salary (see Table 3). Similar to Andersen et al. (1997) and Williams and Scherzer (2003), participants were asked if they had experienced certain challenges related to their work (see Table 4)

## DISCUSSION

The responses of the survey participants illuminate the experiences of SPP graduates



who have recently transitioned into employment. The data suggests some optimism that the field is growing, though there is reason for concern as well. Compared to the most recent similar study of early career professionals (Williams & Scherzer, 2003), a much higher percentage of respondents reported that SPP was the primary emphasis of their current job; 30% compared to 13% for master's graduates, and 75% to 47% for doctoral graduates. Similarly, both groups of current professionals reported high levels of satisfaction in their current work. These findings support the notion that opportunities within SPP are growing. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there has been an increase in both the number of SPP positions posted in collegiate athletic departments and the number of SPP trained individuals hired to work with the U.S. Army (Weir, 2018).

There were several concerning findings demonstrating that recent graduates in the field continue to experience challenges as they enter the workforce. Many of these challenges are reported at similar or higher numbers than past cohorts (Andersen et al., 1997; Williams & Scherzer, 2003). Salaries for master's graduates have decreased slightly. When adjusted for inflation (CPI Inflation Calculator, 2019), average salaries grew for this group between the work of Andersen et al. (1997) and Williams and Scherzer (2003) from \$36,136.25 to \$42,253.70. The average salary reported in the current study was \$41,100. This figure is much less than the estimate that

participants in the Fitzpatrick et al, 2016 study believed their starting salary would be: \$46,421.88. However, salaries may have increased for doctoral graduates, as they reported an average salary of \$67,969.65. The average salary reported by Andersen et al. was \$54,796.79; Williams and Scherzer's cohort of doctoral graduates reported an average salary of \$63,602.95. As doctoral students, the predicted income of \$63,250.00 was slightly lower than what was realized (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). For both master's and doctoral trained professionals, the more accurate typical salary is likely the median value due to large variances. However, these figures were not provided in earlier studies so mean figures are used for comparisons. Both the current data and the trends observed over time should lead individuals preparing to enter the field to expect moderate salaries. This likelihood should be considered by prospective students, especially master's students for whom there are few mechanisms such as assistantships to financially support their education (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016). Combined with the data on the time spent doing applied work, individuals entering the field may need to consider other income opportunities to supplement their SPP work. Among doctoral graduates, this is often academia. Master's graduates have a more difficult time identifying SPP employment that is not applied in nature. For both groups, seeking licensure as a mental health professional could represent an employment opportunity that allows for individuals to simultaneously seek SPP work and other income opportunities.







A recent reflection by Martin (2019) argues that SPP is not yet a viable profession and that there is little reason to think it will change. Others, including the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP, 2019) believe that there are mechanisms to increase the market for applied professionals in the field. Similarly, the American Psychological Association (APA) has touted a growing demand for sport psychologists (Weir, 2018). The question about the potential

size of the job market is one of critical importance, and one that is likely to be poorly understood by students in the field. Some current participants reported high satisfaction with their work, high incomes, and high levels of applied work; other participants reported the opposite experience. While some young professionals appear to be obtaining access to the field and achieving success, others are struggling. A critical question for training programs

and organizing bodies, such as APA and AASP, is how to meet the training needs of those who will work primarily in SPP while preparing students with a versatile skill set in case they do not. This need is heightened in SPP given the recent attention paid to diversifying mental performance consulting beyond traditional sport. For example, there has been an increase in discussions focusing on work in emerging performance settings such as eSports

(e.g., Cottrell et al., 2019) and domains outside of sport such as firefighting (Gnacinski et al., n.d.), music (Pecen et al., 2016), and emergency medicine (Mugford & Temple, n.d.).

The interest in these areas can be interpreted several ways. Cynically, it can be interpreted as a response to a lack of opportunity in traditional sport settings, a stance put forth by Martin (2019). Others, (e.g., Sly et al.,



2020) interpret this interest as a signal that the field is evolving and future professionals need to be ready to capitalize on new markets. This notion has had momentum within the field. Portenga et al. (2017) argued for a reconceptualization of sport psychology as a subdiscipline of performance psychology. Several training programs have at least partially embraced this stance as they now identify themselves as more than just sport psychology or sport and exercise psychology. West Virginia University (WVU), for instance, uses the name Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology (West Virginia University, 2020) and National University uses the name Performance Psychology (National University, 2020). New programs are following suit, as the University of Wisconsin Green Bay, which started a program in 2018, titles their program similarly to WVU (University of Wisconsin Green Bay, 2020), and a newly created program at Holy Names University titled their degree Applied Sport and Performance Psychology (Holy Names University, 2020). The best determination of the viability of SPP professionals' ability to secure work in diverse performance settings is to track the careers of those working in the field, identifying the types of positions that they are finding jobs, the populations with whom they are working, and capturing their experiences as they progress through their careers.

The findings of this work need to be interpreted with caution given the low sample size. Despite the low raw number

of respondents, however, the response rate from the pool of potential participants was significantly higher than should be expected with internet survey research (Dillman, 2011). Additionally, given the exploratory nature of the study, and the critical importance of understanding the experiences and perceptions of early professionals in SPP, the data still have value. For instance, the findings support the need for continued investigation of recent graduates and early career professionals. This need is heightened given the dearth of SPP research examining the experiences of professionals as they move through the milestones of their training and career. Critically, longitudinal studies such as the current work needed to be utilized to increase the likelihood that the experiences of individuals who leave the field will be captured. Studies with similar aims often use recruitment procedures that leave this group out (e.g., professional listservs or membership lists of professional organizations). The field needs information about students who leave the field and professionals working in SPP settings who were not trained in SPP graduate programs. Anecdotal evidence of these professionals has long fueled resentment among SPP trainees and professionals; capturing the commonality of this phenomenon will help to define the potential marketplace. It may also illuminate needed areas of training.

Regular, large scale investigations of the success, satisfaction, and experiences of individuals during the beginning of their careers helps the field better understand the market into which its growing number of





graduates are entering. Additionally, further investigating young professionals' experiences via qualitative studies will add much needed depth and context to the understanding of this critical developmental period. From the start of the field until present day, there has been much discussion and debate over the opportunities available to SPP graduates. As outlined earlier, this discussion has evolved to include the viability of securing work with performers in non-sport settings. The potential to work in diverse, high-level performance arenas is undoubtedly enticing to students and professionals alike. The field has both a pragmatic and moral motivation to continue researching young professionals. It is in the interest of future professionals to gather evidence of the effectiveness of training, where gaps exist, and guidance on how to best translate SPP knowledge to new markets. Perhaps more importantly, the field needs data-based measures of the job market and the success of professionals. Students are eager to invest in their future. Knowing if this kind of work is possible to obtain will help to guide them as they consider the broadened opportunities of performance psychology as viable career options. ★





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**Table 1:** Participant Breakdown by Graduate Program

<b>Program Type</b>	<b>n</b>
Master's within Psychology/Counseling Department	12
Master's Program within Kinesiology/Sport Science/Physical Education Department	12
Ph.D. or Ed.D within Psychology/Counseling Department	2
Ph.D. or Ed.D within Kinesiology/Sport Science/Physical Education Program	18
PsyD	1
Other (Master's program within Education Psychology Department)	1
Some combination of the above*	5

\*Three individuals received a doctoral degree and two master's degree, and two individuals received a doctoral degree and one master's degree



**Table 2:** Current Positions

<b>Current Positions</b>	<b>Master's Graduates (n = 11)</b>	<b>Doctoral Graduates (n = 19)</b>
Coach	0	0
<b>APPLIED SPORT PSYCHOLOGY POSITION</b>		
Private practice	0	3
Employed by an organization	2	2
Clinical or counseling work	1	2
Business	2	0
Athlete student services	1	1
<b>UNIVERSITY POSITION</b>		
Kinesiology/exercise science	1	12
Psychology/counseling	0	4
<b>RESEARCH POSITION</b>		
Academic setting	0	2
Other setting	0	0
Sports medicine	0	2
Other	5*	1^

Note: Participants could list all that apply.

\*One participant listed administrative support, two listed IT, one listed online instructor/personal trainer, and one listed that they were recently laid off

^ Performance consultant



**TABLE 3:** Graduate Satisfaction and Career Outcomes

<b>Variable</b>	<b>n</b>	<b>M (SD)</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
1. Number of internship hours completed	20	443.65 (466.95)		.020	-.311	.053	.143	.586*
2. Satisfaction with SPP internships <sup>a</sup>	25	3.12 (.88)	.020		-2.18	.476*	.255	-.235
3. SPP emphasis in current career <sup>b</sup>	31	1.61 (.84)	-.311	-.218		-3.17	-.226	-.106
4. Satisfaction with current career <sup>c</sup>	31	4.03 (.95)	.053	.476*	-.317		-.201	.131
5. % of income from SPP work	19	42.11 (43.89)	.143	.255	-.226	-.201		.298
6. Current salary	28	\$56,660.14 (\$39,202.62)	.586*	-.235	-.106	.131	.298	

**a** Measured on a 4-point Likert-Type Scale: 1 = not at all satisfied, 2 = somewhat satisfied, 3 = satisfied, and 4 = very satisfied

**b** 1 = primary emphasis, 2 = secondary emphasis, and 3 = no emphasis

**c** Measured on a 5-point Likert-Type scale scored: 1 = not satisfied at all, 2 = a little satisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = mostly satisfied, and 5 = entirely satisfied

\*  $p < .05$



**TABLE 4:** Career Challenges

	<b>Master's Graduates</b>	<b>Doctoral Graduates</b>
Challenge	(n = 11)	(n = 19)
Limited market	55%	36%
Limited financial support	46%	21%
Limited access to athletes and teams	36%	5%
Time demands	18%	42%
Image/credibility problems	18%	10%
Competition with psychologists	36%	26%
Inadequate training	36%	5%
Racial biases	0%	5%
Gender	9%	31%
Competition with untrained professionals	9%	31%

Note: Participants could select more than one challenge





## FROM COVER

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