

"SKI SCHOOL" UPDATE

Courtesy of China Peak Mountain Resort

AMERICA'S COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES MENTOR TOMORROW'S SKI AREA STAFF

With 10,000 Baby Boomers turning 65 daily, the ski industry, like many, is currently losing many upper management employees to retirement. One source for replenishing management staff is academia. Among America's roughly 2,600 four-year colleges and universities and 1,000 community colleges, at least 10 offer a ski resort-focused curriculum.

From Vermont to California, ski resort-focused associate's, bachelor's and post-graduate degrees and certificates are earned via a combination of traditional classroom instruction and on-mountain experience. Among the students are aspiring ski resort general managers, risk managers, lift mechanics, instructors, groomers, marketing and technology directors, among other positions.

The four-year bachelor's degree programs tend to wrap ski area management and operations into a business degree, preparing students for management positions. The two-year associate's degree programs are more ski industry-operations focused, but also position students to opt for a four-year degree. Certificate programs generally serve the ski industry's continuing education needs and are offered at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Next fall marks the 49th anniversary of both Colorado Mountain College in Leadville, Colo., and Gogebic Community College in Ironwood, Mich., debuting college degrees in ski area management and operations. Those programs both began in the fall of 1970, followed by Northern Vermont University Lyndon (1972) and Northern Michigan University in Marquette, Mich. (late 1970s). In 1981, Colorado Mountain College, with the help of Olympic medalist Billy Kidd, added a ski business marketing program at its Steamboat Springs, Colo., campus.

Today, the ski industry leaders of tomorrow are also enrolled in programs at Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village, Nev. (1995); Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich. (2010);

Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colo. (2015); and the University of Maine at Farmington (2015).

The newest program begins in fall 2019 at Lees-McRae College in Banner Elk, NC, five miles from Beech Mountain Resort. The college will offer an undergraduate minor in "Ski Industry Business & Instruction," including PSIA-AASI Alpine, Snowboard, and Adaptive Level 1 certifications.

"Forty-four percent of students in our Outdoor Recreation Management program currently have a ski or snowboard certification," said Program Coordinator, Katie C. Wall, WEMT, Ed.D. "We saw an interest and a need for our students

to have a formalized academic program in the ski industry."

Also new next fall, Northern Michigan University will offer to anyone with an associate's degree in ski area operations/business management the option to complete the bachelor's degree almost entirely online.

"The capstone course would require one week of residency here in Marquette, most likely during the off-season for northern hemisphere ski area professionals," explained program director Brian Zinser, who created the online applied science in management degree completion program.

Graduate students, along with those already working at ski areas and those considering a return to ski area employment, are served by the online-only Ski Area Management Program at Colorado State University, which awards certificates to those who complete the program's six courses.

"The program was largely designed to cater to the ski industry's continuing education needs," notes program director Natalie Ooi, PhD. "There was a recognition among ski area managers that there was a need for a graduate-level program that could provide existing ski area employees with the skill sets they need to move forward in their careers, without having to leave their jobs in the industry."

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NSAA's Kelly Pawlak addresses a class of future industry professionals at CSU

Regarding those returning to the ski industry, Ooi notes that “many of these mid-career professionals worked as lifties or ski instructors back in their day and are slowly finding their way back to the industry. They want to find a way to differentiate themselves from the pool of applicants and signal to HR managers at a ski area that they are legitimately interested in changing their current career trajectory to work for the ski industry.”

To date, an estimated 2,220 graduates have earned diplomas or certificates from ski resort-focused programs collectively. Current enrollment varies; Sierra Nevada College reports having 50 students in the most recent semester, Gogebic Community College 18, Ferris State University 16 and Northern Vermont University 10.

Graduates include Waterville Valley Resort President and General Manager, Tim Smith, Northern Michigan University/Gogebic Community College; Resorts of the Canadian Rockies Senior Vice President, Neil Jackson, Colorado Mountain College, Leadville; Stowe Mountain Resort Senior Director of Mountain Operations, Scott Reeves, Northern Vermont University; and Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows Director of Guest Services, Special Events and Activities, Kyle Crezee, Sierra Nevada College.

“The Sierra Nevada College program was a great starting point for my career. It provided me with a basic foundation rooted in strong business fundamentals,” said Crezee, adding that “having an edge in a competitive job market can be the difference between getting hired or not even getting a call back.”

Undergraduate ski area curriculum has held consistent over the years, beyond adding snowboarding and classes addressing the enhanced technologies now commonly employed in ski area operations, including snowmaking and geospatial technology for slope and trail design. These newer classes complement the standards: fundamentals of snowmaking, ski instruction and slope grooming, as well as Ski Lift Construction, Ski Equipment Mechanics, Introduction to Ski Business, Resort Marketing and Sales and credit-earning

internships. Students are also required to take the standard general education courses required by each college, ensuring a foundation in math and writing. Most programs also address summer operations and new-participant recruitment to grow the sport -and some include online learning opportunities too.

An example of a college differentiating itself is Sierra Nevada College's Resort Master Planning class, where student teams compete to build the best resort, “from entrance roads and day lodges to lifts, trails and snowmaking systems,” with a theoretical \$110,000,000 budget and a real \$500 prize.

Another example is Colorado Mountain College's Ski and Snowboard Shop Technician Certification, endorsed by SnowSports Industries America. “SIA is working to support snow sports retailers by educating current and potential employees to the buying, retailing and brand related career tracks,” said SIA's President, Nick Sargent. SIA is so proud of its partnership with Colorado Mountain College that it is currently working with the college to make the classes more accessible by offering non-credit, online versions, with a discount for SIA members.

“These courses are a great way to help retailers not only bring on educated staff already versed in the business, but also help maintain their best employees,” noted Sargent.

Undergraduates believe industry-specific degrees will put them at the head of the line at ski area human resource offices and further their ski area careers, according to students and instructors interviewed for this story. Likewise, many current ski area employees recognize the value of industry-specific continuing education certificates.

When ski-resort HR departments see that an applicant has a ski-industry degree, “they know that person is invested in the industry and their resume goes to the top of the pile,” said Colorado Mountain College program director Jason Gusaas. Gusaas has taught ski area operations there since 2008 and completed the ski area management program at Gogebic Community College, before spending 25 years working in various ski industry positions.

“Our graduates see a sharp upward turn in their careers in years 3 to 5, when they are getting promoted to foreman of groomers, ski patrol and other departments, versus this happening in 8 to 10 years for those without a ski-industry degree,” said Gusaas. He added that his graduates also more quickly become department heads.

Copper Mountain's Director of Employee Experience, Kelly Renoux, SPHR, SHRM-SCP*, said “Having a ski area-focused degree is definitely a plus.” Copper has partnered with Colorado Mountain College to offer scholarships, notes Renoux. “We've been thrilled to have some of our own employees as part of their instructing staff and to offer real ▶

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C.J. GAUNCE



NATALIE OOI

world experiences for their students and those from the other schools too," she said.

Renoux and other ski area executives stress that on-mountain experience is critical and can be gained without a ski-industry specific degree, but that having such a degree amplifies an applicant's commitment to staying at the mountain and having a ski area management career.

According to C.J. Gaunce, Northern Vermont University '20, undergraduates choose a ski-focused program based on the faculty's ski area work experience, and the proximity of the campus to ski areas. They want to frequently and conveniently visit ski areas to learn firsthand about the variances in resort operating styles.

Michigan's Gogebic Community College has its own small ski area, Mt. Zion, and operates Porcupine Mountain Ski Area, 50 miles from campus. Northern Vermont University students have their own campus terrain park and tour resorts including Stowe Mountain Resort and Jay Peak Resort. Colorado Mountain College has its own terrain park and works with Vail Resorts and others. Sierra Nevada College works with all the Lake Tahoe area resorts, including Diamond Peak Ski Resort, which is two miles from campus. In North Carolina, the new program at Lees-McRae College will be closely associated with Beech Mountain Resort, five miles from campus. Northern Michigan works with Marquette Mountain three miles from campus. University of Maine at Farmington partners with Titcomb Mountain, five miles from campus. Ferris State University partners with Boyne Mountain, about 120 miles north of campus. Ferris students have also worked at the Winter X Games in Aspen, as part of what the school titles a four-day "Learning in Action" opportunity. Students have worked with communication systems, crowd control and have interaction with guests and participating athletes.

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Northern Vermont University is 25 miles from Stowe, where C.J. Gaunce held paid winter and summer positions since September 2016, including assisting in inspection, diagnostics, repair and maintenance of lifts.

"If it wasn't for my decision to choose NVU then I would not be where I am today," said Gaunce, whose online resume is titled "Aspiring Resort Operations Manager."

Networking opportunities pay off, too. "The people that I have met in the past four years will probably end up changing my life forever," said Austin French, who recently did an internship at Colorado's Copper Mountain's Ski & Ride School as part of earning a University of Maine alpine operations certificate. French met Copper's Todd Casey during his freshman year, when Casey was a guest speaker.

"My connection with Todd was a great way to get my foot in the door," noted French.

University of Maine program coordinator, Scott Hoisington, explained that "having a network helps obtain the better jobs in the ski industry." Hoisington is a member of the PSIA-Eastern Alpine Development Team and Kids Center supervisor at Sugarloaf Mountain.

Sierra Nevada College ski business and resort management program Director Tim Cohee, who has been in ski-industry management for 40 years, concurs.

"I contact my colleagues at any resort from Maine to California when I have strong candidates for open positions," said Cohee, who was president and general manager

of Kirkwood Resort for 17 years. Since 2010, he's been owner/operator of California's China Peak ski resort.

Colorado State's Ooi concludes, "Today it is exciting for the industry that there are educational opportunities at all levels of higher education for ski area employees."

"Not only do I think having gone through Colorado State's program helped me get the job, but I also use the knowledge gained through the program regularly throughout my work day," said Alpine Meadows Base Area Manager Pat Fraser. He completed Colorado State's program in 2016 to complement his Bachelor's Degree Agricultural and Natural Resource Economics from the University of Connecticut. Fraser added, "I would highly recommend the program to anyone looking to take the next step in their career in the ski industry." ■

John Brice founded Snow Sports PR in 2009 and has been honored by the states of Utah and California with "Best PR Campaign" awards. Contact John at John@SnowSportsPR.com with any questions.