Community sport has come under the research lens recently, in large part because of a growing focus on its (potential) role in helping achieve government policy objectives that range from individual physical and emotional health, to community cohesion (e.g., Bloom, Grant, & Watt, 2005; Bowen, 2004; Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006; Hoye & Nicholson, 2009; Taylor, 2004). Policy and research attention to organized community sport stems from the fact that it is where people play (e.g., CFLRI, 2005; Delaney & Keaney, 2005). Scholarly interest ranges from investigation of the benefits of community sport – including critical examination of whether the benefits are as they are claimed – to an understanding of the mechanisms for community sport development. Given the growing body of research, it is timely to convene a group of key individuals who are investigating these issues to present and discuss some of the key themes being examined.

This symposium provides a forum for several international scholars to come together to share their research on community sport, with projects that consider the benefits accrued from community sport involvement, and mechanisms for sport development in the community. The session comprises four presentations, each of which provides a brief overview of the scholars’ work (or some aspect of it), as outlined below. This is followed by a chaired discussion among the audience and presenters that allows reflection on the collective knowledge to date, and consideration of gaps and directions for future research.

The first presentation is based on a project that broadly examines the role of community sport organizations in the creation, development, and maintenance of social capital. In doing so, it seeks to empirically establish whether the claim that sport organizations are the ‘social glue’ of a community has merit. Specifically, the research explores three related questions: (a) what is the nature of the relationship between individuals’ involvement in sport and active recreation and perceptions of social inclusion and connectedness; (b) how does involvement in sport and active recreation impact on the social connectedness experienced by individuals and their subsequent wellbeing; and (c) what role do formalized sport and recreation organizations play in facilitating or supporting social inclusion and connectedness of individuals. The project is using a mixed methods approach: Question 1 was investigated using two large-scale cross-sectional surveys of the population in Victoria; Australia's second most populous State. Questions 2 and 3 are being addressed via qualitative research in the form of in-depth semi-structured interviews with sport participants and case studies of community sport organizations. The research findings to date indicate that participation in community sport organizations has a small but significant predictive effect on measures of social inclusion and connectedness. The presentation focuses on the findings of the qualitative investigation addressing questions 2 and 3. The research provides an important body of evidence with which to inform government policy and establishes a foundation upon which community sport organizations might build a stronger case to advocate for their role as social organizations within communities.

The second presentation reports on a study of parents’ perceptions of the benefits their children obtain in variations of formal and informal community sport settings in the US. Children’s lives are increasingly filled with organized activity. Children’s leisure, long considered a time for unstructured activity and play, is almost disappearing from their lives, replaced with formal, adult-led activities. Central to the shift toward formalization of children’s leisure are two parental drives: (a) to encourage and facilitate their child’s achievement, and (b) to minimize the risk to which their child is exposed. The marketplace has responded to these parental desires by offering safe, adult-supervised activities which purport to prepare young people to achieve. Organized youth sport is popular with parents who value achievement and organized activity for their children. Traditional sport settings are achievement oriented, adult-driven (hence perceived as safe), and are perceived to provide children with a wide range of benefits such as health, socialization, character building, time management skills, and sometimes a chance to earn a college
The fourth presentation is a research project that explores community sport councils as a means to facilitate collaboration among community sport organizations (CSOs). The most recent Canadian Sport Policy (2002, p. 19) suggests that “collaboration, communication, and cooperation amongst the partners in the sport community” is critical to the development of young athletes. The purpose of this research was to understand the emergence of the population of 23 sport councils in the province of Ontario over the last decade. Critical questions about how these sport councils were formed and the rationales for continued membership by CSOs were the focus of this research. Scholarly literature on partnerships and collaboration were used to inform this research (e.g., Child & Faulkner, 1998; Greenhalgh, 2001; Oliver, 1990; Todeva & Knoke, 2005). Methods included an analysis of the websites of Ontario’s existing sport councils, and phone interviews with representatives from sport councils in Ontario. The presentation will report on the results of this research which suggest that sport councils have varying levels of effectiveness, local influence, productivity, and engagement of CSOs. The reasons for differences among the sport councils included variations in their funding, governance structures, mandates, and scope of operations. The implications of this research suggest that the sport councils that directly benefit CSOs are more effective. However, the lack of sustained funding from government, the private sector, or from fee-for-services program delivery limits the capacity of some of these organizations to foster collaboration among CSOs.