In 2008, the Seattle Supersonics, a National Basketball Association (NBA) franchise, was relocated to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma and renamed the Thunder. This high-profile move was met with adulation in Oklahoma and dismay in Washington. Political leaders in Oklahoma City began to gather funding to renovate the team’s new arena and practice facility. The team relocation was covered heavily in the local and national media, with pundits weighing in on both sides of the franchise movement issue.

Professional sports franchises remain one of the highest profile businesses that attract the attention of business and political leaders in cities across the United States. Their mere presence in a marketplace is often touted as an economic boon. However, the literature provides little support for the direct positive economic benefit of a professional franchise (Coates & Humphries, 2003). Other researchers have investigated the use of a professional sports team as a strategic asset that, used correctly, can provide benefits to a community (Sparvero & Chalip, 2007). Some have suggested that sport teams may provide a base, or social anchor, for community development (Clopton & Finch, 2011).

Social anchors act as a support for the development and maintenance of social capital and social networks. Social anchors may range from schools, sports, corporations, or natural structures (Goodsell, 1997), to cultural events and festivals (Wood & Thomas, 2005) which are “social occasions with potential social value” (Chalip, 2006, p.123). For an institution to be a social anchor, it must also enhance or construct a sense of community, trust, or reciprocation within social networks. There is a definite continuum of bonding and bridging social capital that are directly connected with social anchoring. True social anchors have the ability to enhance bonding social capital, where individuals might gather together in a setting that reinforces their relationships, but also promote the creation of new network extensions across demographical lines such as race, class, sex, and religion (i.e. bridging social capital).

In fact, myriad research efforts in community development and have concluded communities benefit the greatest when both forms of social capital are enhanced and maintain high levels (Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2005).

Social anchors like local YMCA’s or community centers display the ability to embrace diversity within any given community and provide a consistent avenue or medium to enhance these relationships. The celebration of Mardi Gras serves as a broad example of this social interaction by strengthening and creating social networks for residents of New Orleans and Southern Louisiana through significantly impacting the community and regional identities of New Orleans, Louisiana, and even the Gulf South region (Guinin-Lelle, 2007). Second, according to Social Anchor Theory, social anchors will be able to achieve bridging social capital most effectively through creating, enhancing, and sustaining a collective identity of the community. According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978), individuals engage in personal identity creation using the formation of ingroups and outgroups. Often based upon personal characteristics (i.e. race, sex, occupation) these groups can also be formed along social institutions (i.e. fans of a sports team, students at a university, member of a neighborhood association). Once the groups are established, individuals confirm such notions as ingroup bias (Hogg & Adams, 1990) and specific social esteem (Foels & Tomcho, 2005). Thus, it is important for social anchors to exist as a medium for which individuals can identify, embrace, and exist as an overall community identity, a concept referred to as a Common Ingroup Identity (Gaertner et al, 1999).

According to the Common Ingroup Identity Model, individuals within a given community context create and maintain numerous subordinate identities that serve as ingroups for them. However, there exists one large, overarching superordinate identity which draws in all subordinate identities together. The power of the common ingroup identity – or superordinate identity – increases positive intergroup attitudes, intergroup forgiveness, and improves intergroup relations (Dovidio, Gaertner, Saguy, & Halabi, 2007). These findings impact the necessary trust levels that keep the daily “transaction costs” of a community low (Putnam, 2000, p. 135). Strong communities that maintain distinct collective identities do so by maintaining this superordinate identity – which is supported through a feeder system of subordinate, or subgroup, identities. Moreover, this identity dimension supports Nalbandian’s
(2005) call for community and the drive for identity, claiming that people want to be a part of creating and maintaining a community with authenticity to which they identify. Social anchors allow a community to achieve this authenticity by preserving the uniqueness of the community through a consistent marker of identification.

The purpose of this study is to analyze the impact that the relocation of the Supersonics/Thunder franchise has had on Oklahoma City. How has Oklahoma City capitalized on their new status as a “major league city”? What part has the Thunder franchise played in the overall strategy for community development in Oklahoma City?

To explore the research question at hand, a mixed methods approach will be employed. First, surveys were administered to listservs of community neighborhood organizations to assess social capital (Williams, 2006), perceptions of external prestige (Carmelli, 2006), identification with the community teams (Wann & Branscombe, 1993), overall community identity (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992), civic pride (Wood, 2006), and affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1993). Further, community members were asked open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of their community, the impact of sports upon the community, and other elements of the community that impact the networks of community members. Responses (n = 187) were collected through a convenience sampling by selecting listservs and having the link to the study sent to each community neighborhood organization. Second, semi-structured interviews with personnel of the Oklahoma City Thunder and political leaders in Oklahoma City were conducted. Interviews were transcribed using in-depth field notes before analysis. Important quotes will be used during the write-up to illustrate key thoughts from the interviews. Themes and sub-themes will be presented and discussed with regard to similarities to previous research as well as new ideas and insights that may prove interesting and beneficial to the topic matter (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999).

Initial results indicate that the presence of the OKC Thunder as a social institution does suggest its role in the community is that of a social anchor. In fact, identifying with the Thunder showed a significant predictability of overall community identity ($\beta = .47$, $p < .001$) and enhancement of positive community perceptions ($\beta = .40$, $p < .001$). Follow up interview data also suggest that the OKC Thunder utilized this connection between the Thunder organization and community members for policy formation and even organizational strategy. Still, results from this study suggest that the connection between large-scale sport organizations and their ability to anchor the social development of a community has only been lightly touched. More additional research is recommended to explore the intricacies of sport’s role in building community and leveraging such outcomes as community identity, community cohesion, and civic engagement. Further, it is recommended that sport organizations incorporate this potential into its organizational structure and policy, making them able to expand upon this potential as one that is symbiotic for the organization, the community, and for community members.