Partners in Health Promotion: The Role of Sport Organizations

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Rising concerns about physical inactivity and related health problems have resulted in the development of new and innovative means of promoting healthy lifestyles (CFLI, 2005; WHO, 2005). Reducing the prevalence of population-wide physical inactivity is a priority of many public health services throughout the world (Jones et al., 1998; Sparling et al., 2000). However, despite their common focus, there is a general lack of coordinated effort among such organizations to address rising rates of physical inactivity (Bull et al., 2005). Sport and physical activity are purported be important instruments for marketing and promoting healthy lifestyles and tackling health concerns (Bauman & Craig, 2005; Bloom et al., 2005). In addition to the central mandates of sport and recreation organizations seeking to deliver recreation and competitive sport opportunities, they also provide an opportunity for physical activity, fitness, and individual well-being (Wankel, 1994). As such, sport and recreation organizations can play a key role in the development and coordination of physical activity strategies in health promotion.

While there is a growing body of literature on partnerships for sport organizations, the majority of this research has examined how partnerships impact specific sport organizations and their ability to provide sport services or build their own organizational capacity (e.g., Babiak & Thibault, 2008; Misener & Doherty, 2009). There is a paucity of research that has examined the engagement of a wide range of sport and recreation organizations in partnerships that promote active lifestyles more broadly, without being limited to specific membership-based involvement (Casey et al., 2009). Thus, the purpose of this research is to understand the potential role of sport organizations in health promotion partnerships. Through a case study of a local, multisectoral initiative aimed at building community capacity for health promotion, the research aims to identify how the efforts of sport organizations can be coordinated with other partners to provide a meaningful and sustained contribution to health promotion.

Joint initiatives between educational, health, and social institutions using sport and leisure to address quality of life issues have emerged in the context of local leisure services (Thibault, Frisby, & Kikulis, 1999). Thibault et al.’s research showed that partnerships foster the development of a shared vision for sport and leisure services, enhance organizational effectiveness and efficiency, and reduce duplication of programs. Notably, working together, rather than in ‘silos’ is a central pillar of the Canadian Sport Policy (2002) where enhanced interaction is claimed to be critical for increasing sport participation, and ultimately health. Similarly, Best et al. (2003) have argued that narrowly targeted, less collaborative approaches to health promotion are not as effective in building capacity than comprehensive, participatory, and collaborative approaches. Despite these benefits, many challenges also persist as organizations attempt to work cooperatively, especially when partners represent various sectors (i.e., nonprofit, for-profit, public). For example, research on sport and recreation organizations and their various partners has demonstrated that unequal resources, power asymmetries, time demands, and competing agendas may compromise the potential outcomes of cross-sector partnerships (Alexander et al., 2008; Babiak & Thibault, 2009; Frisby et al., 2004; Shaw & Allen, 2006). With the proliferation of partnership arrangements for physical activity promotion, research is needed to understand the complexities and challenges of meeting the goals of partners from across the various sectors.

The current research involves an instrumental case study design (Stake, 2003) focusing on a community-based initiative to promote healthy and active living in a midsized Canadian community of approximately 420,000 people. The initiative aims to achieve its objective of building Canada’s healthiest community through “communications/social marketing, targeted community strategies, building community partnerships, and measurement through research and evaluation”. The initiative is built upon a national health promotion strategy aimed at building partnerships to implement a comprehensive, community-wide active living strategy with a focus on physical activity. The initiative is comprised of a range of nonprofit community partners that have committed to the vision, mission, and operating principles/values of health promotion. Through an in-depth examination of the
various partnerships involved in the initiative, the case provides us with a context to understand how the efforts of sport organizations in particular can be coordinated with other community health partners to provide a meaningful and sustained contribution to health promotion. The study draws upon multiple sources of data including document analysis (meeting minutes, contracts, by-laws, government documents, etc.); observation at monthly meetings for 6 months as an active-member researcher within the steering committee; and interviews with steering committee members and sport organization partners. Currently, there are 54 community partners involved in the initiative and our focus is on the five ‘sport’ partners. Semi-structured interviews focus on the role of sport organizations in health promotion through questions about organizational priorities, decision-making strategies, and involvement level of sport partners within the coordinated planning process as well as perceived challenges and benefits of involvement in the initiative.

This study will contribute to the literature on cross-sector partnerships by increasing knowledge of how sport organizations may be involved in health promotion initiatives. The presentation will also include a discussion of the challenges and implications of these partnerships and how linkages can be strengthened to enhance opportunities for cross promotion and alignment of core values related to healthy living.