Sport, Community, and Health: The Benefits and Repercussions

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A growing body of literature suggests that individuals who participate in sport in settings that foster a sense of community reap positive benefits as a result of this community (e.g., Fairley & Tyler, 2012; Warner, 2012). Recent research has linked an enhanced sense of community to program retention in sport (Kellett & Warner, 2011; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013), while literature outside of sport suggests that increased sense of community is linked to improved health, overall well-being, and even civic participation (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1991). Further, the literature also clearly points to sport as being especially conducive to building community, and in fact, sport has been cited as one of the few remaining social institutions that build community (cf. Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1997; Warner, 2010). However, the benefits of an enhanced sense of community (beyond program retention) in sport, thus far, have only been assumed in literature. The work in the community psychology realm suggests that increases in one’s sense of community leads to positive health and lifestyle benefits, such as significantly less drug use and delinquent behavior (Battistich & Hom, 1997), improved well-being (Davidson & Cotter, 1991), and increased civic participation (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). Along with this, the sociological literature points to a connection between a lack of community and many negative consequences (Warner, 2012, 2013), including deviant behavior (Agnew, 1997; Carter & Carter, 2007; Hagan & McCarthy, 1997; Hirschi, 1969) and physical and mental health decrements (Berkman, et al., 2000; Deflem, 1989). As a result, the sport management literature has assumed that the building of community in sport is a positive thing (cf. Warner & Dixon, 2011, 2013; Warner, Dixon, & Chalip, 2012; Warner, Dixon, & Leierer, 2014); however, little to no empirical testing has been done to confirm or challenge this notion.

More importantly, sport is often criticized for demoting prosocial behavior (Kleiber & Roberts, 1981), increasing delinquency rates (e.g., Begg et al., 1996; Kreager, 2007; Snyder, 1994), and increasing alcohol use (e.g., Lorente et al., 2004; Rainey et al., 1996; Wichstrom & Wichstrom, 2009). Finally, sport is frequently treated as a monolithic setting and the differences in outcomes associated with sport programs with different structures, philosophies, and incentives have been largely ignored. Thus, the outcomes of sport and the ensuing community clearly need to be further explored.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to determine the differences in outcomes experienced by participants in two distinct collegiate sport contexts – varsity and club sport; and (2) to determine the extent to which sense of community affects various health outcomes. The authors developed an online survey that included basic demographic information, 21-items from the SCS (Sense of Community in Sport Scale; Warner, Kerwin, & Walker, 2013), and questions related to specific health outcomes, including alcohol consumption, nutrition, physical activity, and various wellness measures (e.g., social, emotional, physical well-being). The online survey was distributed to current athletes on campus (i.e., varsity and club sport athletes) through key personnel in the sport (i.e., director of sport club program, coaches, athletic director).

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) will be conducted to determine differences among the two sport settings of interest, where the levels for the independent variable are club and varsity sport, and the dependent variable is the summed score on the SCS. To address the predictive utility of the SCS, a multiple regression will be conducted, using the summed score on the SCS as the independent variable and the health outcomes as the dependent variables.

It is expected that the results of this research will provide insight of the importance of the collegiate sport setting in the formation of sense of community, as well as the role of sense of community in the achievement of desirable health outcomes. In this presentation, the authors will discuss the results of the research (which is ongoing as of
October 2014), with specific emphasis on the application to collegiate sport program management and relevance of sense of community in sport to public health research.