Legitimacy for Capacity? An Investigation of the Role of Certification in Community Sport Organizations

Katie Misener, University of Waterloo
Torsten Schlesinger, Chemnitz University of Technology
Alison Doherty, Western University
Kyle Johnston, Club Excellence/Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport
Kristen Rogalsky, University of Waterloo

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Certification procedures and schemes have been established to provide formal guidelines for and indicators of organizational performance and quality assurance, and these may act as a source of information for consumers that attests to conformation to accepted standards (e.g., Parkinson et al., 2013). Within the sport sector, certification programs are increasingly being used for standardization; for example, for sports-related goods (ISO codes), sport facilities (e.g., DIN standard catalogues), training programs for coaches (e.g., NCCP, the National Coaching Certification Program in Canada), and specific sport institutions (e.g., labelled “elite school of sport”). In addition to improvements in operations, these programs may provide organizations with enhanced legitimacy in the eyes of their stakeholders, whereby the actions of the organization are consistent with those desired or deemed appropriate in the eyes of stakeholders (e.g., the attainment of specific standards). Certification programs also exist for community sport organizations (CSOs) in various countries: for example, “Clubmark” issued by Sport England, “Club Excellence” issued by the Club Excellence Cooperative (CEC) in Canada, the quality seal “Sports Pro Health” awarded by the German Olympic Sports Confederation (DOSB), and the “IKGym”, a quality-oriented audit tool for gymnastics clubs in Belgium. Given that voluntary sport clubs are trending toward standardization (e.g., Byers, 2009), legitimacy that may be associated with certification may be an important element in the capacity of CSOs to achieve their goals.

There has been limited investigation of the role, impact and consequences of such certification programs, with the exception of Perck and Van Hoecke’s (2010) examination of the impact of IKGym certification on sport club quality and professionalism, and Nichols and Faulkner’s (2013) cost-benefit analysis of the consequences for sport clubs pursuing and attaining Clubmark certification. In order to advance understanding of the role of certification in CSOs, the purpose of the current study is to investigate certification as a source of legitimacy, and whether and how that legitimacy may enhance the capacity of CSOs. We draw on theories of organizational legitimacy and capacity to frame the study, and the following research questions: (1) Is certification perceived to be a source of legitimacy by CSOs? and (2) Does legitimacy enhance the capacity of CSOs to achieve their goals?

Organizational legitimacy is grounded in organizational ecology, institutionalization, and resource dependence theories. It is defined as “a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). Further, organizations seen to be legitimate by internal and external stakeholders may also be seen to be more predictable and trustworthy (Suchman, 1995). As such, legitimacy is viewed as an asset that sustains the flow of resources from the environment, as stakeholders are more likely to support what is perceived to be a ‘legitimate’ organization (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). Thus, the quest for legitimacy may act as a strong motivator for organizations to pursue particular management practices that are considered to be desirable within a given social system (Babiak & Trendafilova, 2011; Washington & Patterson, 2011).

Organizational capacity refers to the ability of an organization to draw on various resources to meet its goals and objectives (Hall et al., 2003). In the community sport context, Doherty, Misener, and Cuskelly (2014) uncovered particular elements within five dimensions of capacity: human resources, infrastructure, finance, planning and development, and external relationships. These elements provide a multidimensional picture of the factors that play a central role in enabling an organization to accomplish it’s central purpose. However, there is ‘space’ for the
consideration of additional or unique assets that an organization may draw on to enhance its capacity for goal achievement. Legitimacy may be one of those assets or resources.

This study involves a qualitative investigation of clubs engaged in the certification process with Club Excellence, a multisport national certification standard in Canada that offers a multilevel affiliation and certification program for CSOs. Phone interviews are currently under way with the Presidents of 20 CSOs across Canada that have attained either the basic level 1 or further level 2 certification. The interview guide explores the purpose and impact of certification for the CSOs, and probes particularly for its role as a source of legitimacy and the impact of that legitimacy on goal achievement. Background information is also gathered in order to establish a profile of the sample and enable meaningful comparisons based on organizational characteristics. The interview data will be analyzed using an inductive thematic analysis process (Patton, 2014). In an additional step, data will also be generated as part of a knowledge mobilization workshop with Club Excellence personnel and community sport representatives in the local (Ottawa) area. This workshop will provide an important layer of analytic triangulation as different voices come together to discuss the initial findings; what Patton (2014) refers to as “audience review as credibility triangulation” (p. 670). CSOs will be identified through the Ottawa Sport Council website and 10-15 clubs will be invited, in conjunction with Club Excellence, to participate in the workshop. The workshop will generate additional perspectives from clubs that have not yet pursued certification. The additional findings will be incorporated into the thematic analysis process noted above, thus ensuring a more holistic understanding of certification as a source of legitimacy.

The findings are expected to uncover the extent to which certification is perceived as a source of legitimacy for CSOs, and what further consequences that may have, if any, for the organizations’ capacity to achieve their goals and objectives. The findings will have further implications for the marketing of certification to CSOs, according to the importance and effectiveness ascribed to certification as a source of legitimacy and thus a capacity resource.

Certification is a growing trend in a variety of industries, and sport is no exception. As sport management scholars, we have a responsibility and opportunity to advance the theoretical and applied understanding of the role of certification in the sport industry. Sport management graduates and those currently in the field are increasingly likely to be tasked with pursuing, attaining and upholding certification in their organization, and the knowledge generated through the current study can provide valuable support and assistance to that process.

Selected References

