Organizational Capacity in Sport-Based Youth Development: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract 2016-331
Saturday, June 4, 2016
20-minute oral presentation (including questions)
(Forum East 4)
3:35 PM

Scholarship on sport-based programs aimed at addressing a myriad of social issues has proliferated during recent years (Schulenkorf, Sherry, & Rowe, in press). These types of programs are often operated by organizations with ambitious goals and objectives. Yet, there remains a noticeable knowledge gap in the literature regarding the ability of these nonprofit organizations to draw on various internal and external resources for achieving their desired goals (Svensson & Hambrick, in press).

The use of sport as a tool to promote social change has become increasingly popular since the late 1990s with establishment of a growing number of sport for development organizations operating in low- and middle-income countries (Coakley, 2011; Coalter, 2010; Guilianotti, 2011). Similar organizations and programs also exist, however, in metropolitan areas across high-income countries (Coalter, 2013; Kidd, 2008). In the United States, the use of sport to promote positive social change is often referred to as sport-based youth development rather than sport for development (Perkins & Noam, 2007). For example, Up2Us—a national coalition of sport-based youth development organizations in the United States—currently has hundreds of member organizations operating these programs in communities across the country.

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of managers of urban sport-based youth development organizations in the United States regarding their organizational capacity. For the purposes of this study, sport-based youth development does not refer to development through participation in traditional sport programs. Instead, sport-based youth development refers to organizations such as Right to Play, Grassroots Soccer, and The First Tee (Whitley, Ferneries, & Barker, 2014). In contrast to traditional sport programs, in the context of sport-based youth development, “the sport skill [is] a secondary goal to the life lessons being learned” (Perkins and Noam, 2007, p. 76). Scholars have discussed programmatic and theoretical aspects associated with successful sport-based youth development programs (see Perkins & Le Menestrel, 2007). Additional research efforts have focused on impact assessments of sport-based youth development initiatives (e.g., Gabriel, DeBate, High, & Racine, 2011). None of these studies, however, have examined organizational capacity among sport-based youth development organizations in the United States.

Therefore, Doherty, Misener, and Cuskelly’s (2014) framework on organizational capacity of community sport clubs served as the guiding theoretical framework for addressing the purpose of this qualitative inquiry. Drawing on this framework and emerging work by other scholars examining nonprofit capacity of sport clubs (Balduck, Lucidarme, Marlier, & Willem, 2015; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2011, 2013) and sport for development organizations (Svensson & Hambrick, in press), this qualitative study was focused on examining the perceived elements within human resources, financial, external relationships, infrastructure, and planning and development capacities among Executive Directors of sport-based youth development nonprofits.

Nonprofit scholars have long studied organizations in both urban and rural settings and there are evidently noticeable contextual differences influencing the capacity of an organization (Guo & Acar, 2005; Snively & Tracy, 2001). Therefore, this study specifically focused on organizations operating programming within one of the top three metropolitan areas in the United States (New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago) since the population size, number of registered nonprofits and corporations, transportation issues, and cost of land may result in different capacity challenges than for organizations operating in smaller cities. Furthermore, findings from this study make an important contribution to our understanding of non-membership nonprofit sport organizations. In contrast to sport clubs, sport-based youth development nonprofits do not have the benefit of relying on members for funding and human resources. Prior nonprofit scholarship has pointed to noticeable capacity issues among membership-based and non-membership nonprofits (Bowman, 2011; Chen, Jhabvala, Kanbur, & Richards, 2007; Nah & Saxton, 2013).
Findings from semi-structured interviews with directors (n = 13) of sport-based youth development nonprofits indicate several organizational aspects influence their ability to fulfill their organizational mission. These findings emerged from data analysis using a two-cycle coding procedure whereby two researchers independently analyzed interview transcripts for emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). Findings from this qualitative study point to the central role of board engagement and having paid staff, as well as the need for internal operations and financial management positions. Board members and their involvement may be of particular importance in the context of this study since non-member nonprofit sport organizations do not have the democratic governance structure of member-based organizations such as community sport clubs.

This study also brings attention to the need for new strategies for recruiting part-time staff members and increased board diversity. Directors also highlighted the need for creative solutions for access to facilities in major urban settings and the need for educating funders on sport-based youth development programming. At the same time, findings from this study revealed that most directors relied heavily on special events for fundraising and some had raised upwards of three-quarters of their operating budget from a single fundraising event. This may be due to large populations and corporate density associated with their geographical location(s). These findings further build on prior sport for development literature, indicating the potential role of special events for renewing/building interest among stakeholders (Schulenkorf & Adair, 2013), specifically among external stakeholders, resulting in increased financial capacity. Findings also suggest that the external relationship capacity may be of increased importance among non-membership sport-based youth development organizations given the need for a multitude of expertise and resources within both sport and non-sport programs, compared to organizations solely operating traditional sport programs. Theoretical and practical implications from this qualitative inquiry will be further discussed as the researchers situate the findings within the broader literature on sport for development and other types of nonprofit sport organizations.

This work was supported by funds received from the NASSM Research Grant Program.