In the United States arguments over the mission, structure, and function, of college sport date back to the initial inclusion of sport in higher education (Smith, 2011). Tracing the history of college sport in America, gymnasiums and physical training were first introduced on college campuses in the early 1800s and viewed as a means for students to engage in healthy activities and prevent campus disorder (Lewis, 1970). These early attempts at providing students physical training failed to gain popularity however until students began participating in “ball games” in the 1840s (e.g., football, baseball, cricket, etc.; Lewis 1970). The ball games soon developed into formal student competitions between universities, engendering university presidents to take control of the contests, which lead to the development of conferences and national associations designed to “run” intercollegiate athletics (Crowley, 2006; Smith, 2011).

Intercollegiate varsity athletic competition, however, has not been the only form of university sponsored sport taking place on college campuses. Rather, even as intercollegiate competition grew, universities continued to recognize sport clubs that promoted competitive sport and provided a social outlet for participants (Lewis, 1970). The growth and prominence of collegiate sport clubs is demonstrated by extensive student participation, with Pennington (2008) estimating approximately two million students engaged in sport clubs in comparison to 430,000 involved in varsity athletics. While sport clubs are classified as student organizations, they have been described in parallel with collegiate athletic programs (Cooney, 1979), thus reflecting characteristics of both program areas. As a whole, sport club programs provide opportunities for students to establish and manage individual clubs that compete at a high level.

When considering collegiate sport clubs as organizations, a club consists of a group of people organized to accomplish a common goal (McNamara, 2013). An organization’s ability to achieve its goals is largely determined by its organizational structure, which considers how the organization coordinates their actions and resources (Jones, 2010). Organizational structure is multi-dimensional in nature, encompassing centralization, formality, design, and specialization (Pedersen, Parks, Quarterman, & Thibault, 2011), with communication cited as particularly critical for goal attainment (Kraut, Fish, Root, & Chalfonte, 1990).

With respect to organizational structure, collegiate sport clubs have been described as informal, flexible, and open (Warner et al., 2012). As participation is voluntary, clubs are more accessible than intercollegiate athletics, making entry, exit, and commitment to a club team autonomous and therefore inconsistent. The informal and inconsistent structure of sport clubs is highlighted by Lower, Turner, and Petersen (2015) who qualify club activities as dependent upon facility and equipment availability, student interest and involvement, and student officer agendas. Warner et al. (2012) described the sport club system as ‘undermanned’, in which the optimal number of individuals (e.g., professional staff) to help the club function is not available. These environmental constraints force sport club participants to take on leadership opportunities, ultimately promoting a club structure characterized by deregulation and informalization. Within a sport club executive board structure, common student leadership positions include president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer. While the executive board is typically comprised of multiple student leaders, the president often holds the most responsibility suggesting a centralized organizational structure (Flosdorf, Carr, Carr, & Pate, 2016). Decision making authority is often reserved for the student executive board, however the degree of specialization within the executive board is typically dependent upon the individual club, more specifically the leadership styles of the current board members. While students are responsible for organizing and managing individual sport clubs, a university liaison within the Recreational Sport department provides some degree of oversight in relation to university policies and procedures. Despite the continual prominence, growth, and importance of collegiate sport clubs in the United States, they have not received the same scholarly focus as intercollegiate athletics resulting in a minimal understanding of their
structure, function, goals, and missions. As such, the purpose of this study was to evaluate the missions and goals of collegiate sport clubs and determine how their organizational structure affected their operations and thus their ability to achieve their objectives. A secondary purpose was aimed at practitioners, and using the found information to provide guidelines on how to effectively provide oversight and support to new and established sport clubs to enhance the organizational capacity and effectiveness of clubs.

To achieve these purposes, the researchers approached the study from a social constructivist epistemology (Kim, 2010), utilizing qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 2013). The study was conducted at a Midwestern university in the United States, targeting two groups - students responsible for management of individual collegiate sport club teams, and professional staff managing the sport club program. Census sampling was employed, in which all sport clubs and professional staff were invited to participate in the study (Andrew et al., 2011). Of the 32 active sport clubs, 13 distinct sport clubs (41% response rate) communicated interest in the study, with a total of 38 sport club officers participating. Additionally, two professional staff (department director and program director) participated in the study (67% response rate). The principal investigator facilitated a 60-minute focus group with each club team separately and 60-minute interview with each staff member separately, using a developed semi-structured focus group protocol and interview guide respectively. Trustworthiness of the data was established through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba, 1981). Thematic analysis was conducted to identify emerging themes in the data (Creswell, 2013). To enhance reliability, the researchers employed a double-coding process, in which the data were coded independently followed by deliberation over the analysis until agreement was reached (Boyatzis, 1998). A third researcher acted as a peer reviewer to enhance the validity of the results. Upon completion, the final codes and themes were interpreted within the context of the broader literature.

Analysis of the data revealed the dominant missions of sport clubs were to improve administrative operations, win competitions, and facilitate social networks. To accomplish these goals, clubs primarily adopted a centralized structure, in which the decision making was controlled by the executive board. While the general operations and communication of clubs were found to be mostly informal, a distinct conflict emerged between the informal structure of clubs and the desire for formality (e.g., preferring election of executive board members but acquiescing to volunteers). Another theme relating to methods of goal obtainment consisted of club finances, in which club activities were largely dependent on the clubs’ ability to generate funding. As a whole, clubs were found to have a simple organizational structure, characterized by a low degree of specialization and formality, albeit high centralization, which allowed clubs to adapt to changes in their environment. The sport club program investigated was found diverse and heterogeneous, suggesting a one-size-fits-all administrative model does not adequately address club needs. As such, recreational sport professional staff should seek to adopt a strategic laissez faire leadership style in which clubs are able to function in a changing environment and structured so that student leaders develop through the experience of establishing and managing clubs. However, it is critical for staff to provide formal training and communication to build the capacity of student leaders, indirectly strengthening the organizational capacity and effectiveness of clubs.