Developing a Framework of Strategic Types in Community Sport

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Community sport organizations (CSOs) such as hockey, soccer, and swimming clubs are typically governed by a volunteer board of directors responsible for the strategic direction of the club (Hoye, Cuskelly, Auld, Kappelides, & Misener, 2019). Much like other grassroots nonprofits, CSOs face capacity challenges (e.g., reliance on volunteers, competition for funding, and rising costs of infrastructure) that may prevent them from effectively utilizing strategic planning (e.g., Doherty, Misener, & Cuskelly, 2014; Wicker, Breuer, & Hennigs, 2012). Given this complex environment, a greater understanding and application of strategy is needed so that CSOs can effectively plan for and deliver sport programming in their communities. To date, there has been little research on strategy in nonprofit sport organizations with a few exceptions (e.g., Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012; Thibault, Slack, & Hinnings, 1993, 1994). Even less is known about the use of strategy by CSOs aside from research on organizational capacity which has demonstrated the need for a better understanding of planning and development within CSOs (e.g., Doherty et al., 2014; Millar & Doherty, 2018).

This study is part of a larger research program that seeks to understand the nature of strategy in the community sport context guided by three elements, shown to influence a strategy and its performance (cf. Pettigrew, 1987). These elements include: content (the subject of the strategy), context (pre-existing conditions and forces within an organization’s environment), and process (the management of actions that influence a strategy’s formulation and implementation) (Pettigrew, 2012). A prior phase of the research examined the content of CSOs’ strategies, identifying the focus and key components of organizational strategy in this context. The current study builds on these findings by developing a framework of strategic types in CSOs, akin to Thibault et al.’s (1993) early research in national sport. The following three research questions guide this study: (1) What are the contextual elements and strategic imperatives (i.e., major change or goals) that CSOs consider when developing strategies?; (2) How can CSOs be classified into strategic types based on these factors?; and (3) What are the organizational characteristics of CSOs in each strategic type?

Semi-structured interviews are underway with Presidents of Ontario-based CSOs from a range of sports (N=20), identified from public websites as having a formal (i.e., written) strategic plan. The interview guide was developed to elicit insights regarding CSOs’ contextual elements (e.g., structure, culture, capacity, community demographics, competition), organizational characteristics (e.g., structure, age, linkages with stakeholders), and strategic imperatives, (e.g., membership growth, volunteer appeal, and new funding streams; Thibault et al., 1993, 1994). Data collection and verbatim transcription is expected to be completed by December 2019. The transcripts will be analyzed in a multistep approach to identify patterns in the data (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Findings are expected to contribute to the literature by developing a framework of strategic types that exist in community sport, enhancing our understanding of the environment in which CSOs operate and the diversity of approaches to strategy in CSOs. Implications for practice and future research will be discussed in the presentation.