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Toward a Multidimensional Framework of Capacity in Community Sport Clubs

Alison Doherty[1], Katie Misener[2], and Graham Cuskelly[3]

Abstract

Community sport clubs are a type of membership association largely run by member volunteers who organize and deliver opportunities for recreational and competitive sport participation. These clubs are where people are most likely to engage in organized sport, and have become a focus for achieving social policy objectives. It is important to understand the structures and processes that enable these organizations to meet their member-focused mandates. The purpose of this study was to develop a framework of organizational capacity in this context by uncovering critical elements within multiple capacity dimensions, namely, human resources, finance, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships. Focus groups with presidents of 51 sport clubs across Ontario revealed key strengths and challenges that impact the ability of these organizations to achieve their sport delivery goals. Variation by club size was observed. Implications for practice and future research on community sport clubs and membership associations are presented.

Keywords

organizational capacity, membership association, community sport

Membership associations are an intriguing subset of nonprofit organizations as they offer a structure and place of identity for those with similar interests to come together in an associational form of organization (Smith, 2009). Community sport clubs are an

[1]Western University, London, Ontario, Canada
[2]University of Waterloo, Ontario, Canada
[3]Griffith University, Queensland, Australia

Corresponding Author:
Alison Doherty, Faculty of Health Sciences, School of Kinesiology, Western University, London, Ontario, Canada N6A 3K7.
Email: adoherty@uwo.ca

important type of membership association formed around a social contract between people with a common interest in (a particular) sport (Thiel & Mayer, 2009). The interests of individual members, and thus the collectivity (Tschirhart, 2006), are served by the mandate of the local soccer, baseball, rowing club, and so forth, to provide members with recreation and competitive programs that focus on both individual and sport development.

Clubs are typically started by parents (e.g., a children's soccer league) or participants themselves (e.g., a mountain biking club) in response to an identified need in the community. They may be further classified as grassroots membership associations, given their almost exclusive reliance on volunteers who tend to be drawn from the members, their local focus, their relatively informal structure, and their modest budgets, the largest proportion of which comes from membership fees (Smith, 2000; Tschirhart, 2006). Member volunteers engage in a variety of (often multiple) roles, including planning and organizing for the club and any special events, fund-raising, and coaching and related aspects of program delivery in support of the club's mandate (Cuskelly, Hoye, & Auld, 2006).

Community sport clubs provide opportunities for physical and mental health benefits, economic returns, and social capital that may accrue through the programs and services they offer (organized physical recreation and sport) and the range of members they serve (from children through to adults; Bloom, Grant, & Watt, 2005; Commission of the European Communities, 2007; Doherty & Misener, 2008; Donnelly & Kidd, 2003). As such, they have become a focus for achieving social policy objectives as a major player in the health and well-being of individuals and their communities (Adams, 2007; Nicholson, Hoye, & Houlihan, 2011; Taylor, 2004). Notably, community sport clubs comprise one of the largest proportions of nonprofit voluntary organizations in many Western countries (Misener & Doherty, 2009) and are where people are most likely to engage in organized sport (Adams, 2007; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Given the pervasiveness of these organizations, and their role in the lives of their members and communities, it is important to understand their capacity to pursue their mandate related to community sport delivery.

Broadly understood, capacity is the ability of an organization to draw on various assets and resources to achieve its mandate and objectives. It is important to understand the nature of those resources so that capacity may be accurately assessed, and capacity building efforts may be effectively focused. Capacity building has been of particular interest in the nonprofit and voluntary sector (Sobeck & Agius, 2007), relying on various conceptual models of capacity to guide the development of interventions and measurement of effect. The multidimensionality of the various models reflects the range of resources that may be key to an organization's effectiveness. Despite generally common dimensions, however, there is consensus that the elements within each dimension are context-specific (Christensen & Gazley, 2008; Eisinger, 2002; Frederickson & London, 2000; Germann & Wilson, 2004; Letts, Ryan, & Grossman, 1999; Raymond, 2010; Sowa, Selden, & Sandfort, 2004). As Wing (2004) noted, "Whatever capacity building might be, it is not going to be the same across such a diversity of kinds of [nonprofit] organizations" (p. 154). What is critical in one context,

such as food banks (Eisinger, 2002), may not be as relevant in other contexts, such as arts and culture (Bendle & Patterson, 2009) or health organizations (Nowell & Harrison, 2011). Therefore, it is important to understand the particular nature of capacity in a given type of organization, such as grassroots membership associations and sport clubs specifically, before efforts can begin to address building that capacity.

The purpose of this study was to develop a framework of organizational capacity in community sport clubs. The investigation draws on Hall et al.'s (2003) model of capacity in the nonprofit sector as a foundation for identifying the critical elements within multiple dimensions; a model that appears to be relevant to the focal context (cf. Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Organization theorists and researchers have given minimal attention to grassroots membership associations, and theory development is needed (Hoggett & Bishop, 1986; Smith, 2009; Toepler, 2003). Indeed, understanding the mechanisms by which these organizations are able to fulfill their mandates is, according to Smith (2009), a pressing topic for research. Several authors have echoed this call with regard to research on sport clubs (Adams, 2007; Harris, Mori, & Collins, 2009; Kirk & MacPhail, 2003; Reid, 2012). The current study addresses this need through an inductive investigation of the critical elements of sport club capacity.

Conceptual Background

Dimensions of Capacity in Nonprofit Organizations

There are an ever-increasing number of multidimensional models of organizational capacity in the nonprofit sector. Broad models, purportedly representing a wide range of types of organizations, have been forwarded by Glickman and Servon (1998); McKinsey & Company (2001); Lusthaus, Adrien, Anderson, Carden, and Plinio Montalvan (2002); Connolly and York (2003); Hall et al. (2003); and Sowa et al. (2004). Some authors have used these models directly or in an adapted format (Casey, Payne, & Eime, 2009; Horton et al., 2003; Marguerite Casey Foundation, n.d.). Others have put forth their own model of capacity dimensions they feel are most germane to the particular context of study (Eisinger, 2002; Frederickson & London, 2000; Germann & Wilson, 2004; Nu'Man, King, Bhalakia, & Criss, 2007; Sobeck & Agius, 2007). Nonetheless, the extant capacity models have several dimensions in common, namely, infrastructure and operations; leadership, vision, and strategy; human, financial, and other core resources; and networks and external relationships.

The continued reconfiguration of broad capacity models is reflective of the diversity of organizational types that comprise the nonprofit sector and suggests that context-specific frameworks may be more pertinent. Indeed, Eisinger (2002) identified three dimensions from the literature deemed to be most relevant to examine organizational capacity in food banks, namely, human resources, institutionalization, and networks. He measured what he determined to be particularly critical elements of those dimensions; specifically, number of staff and staff to volunteer ratio, extent of organization policies and procedures, regular meetings, and strategic planning, and willingness

to seek external help. In another study, Germann and Wilson (2004) derived the critical elements of four dimensions of capacity of regional health authorities from interviews with frontline workers and managers. Organizational values, structure and processes, resources, and internal working relationships were identified from the data as factors that contribute to "empowered and autonomous front-line workers" that influence community development practice (Germann & Wilson, 2004, p. 292). These studies and others (e.g., Frederickson & London, 2000), and the evolution of the nonprofit organizational capacity literature in general, suggest that capacity is context-specific and warrants continued examination in different settings.

Hall et al.'s (2003) broad framework was used as a foundation for the current study as its dimensions—human resources, finance, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships and networks—align with several of the distinguishing features of grassroots membership associations; specifically, the critical reliance on human resources in the form of volunteers, relatively fewer economic resources, a more informal structure, a focus on member benefit goals and activities that address those goals, and relatively fewer external linkages (Smith, 2000). The Hall et al. framework was conceptualized from the literature on human (and particularly intellectual), financial, and structural capital, as key resources that an organization may be able to deploy to achieve its objectives. Human resources refer to the paid staff and volunteers, their competencies, knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Finance refers to revenues, expenses, assets, and liabilities of an organization. Infrastructure includes aspects related to internal structure and day-to-day operations, while planning and development refers to developing and drawing on strategic and program plans. External relationships refer to connections with, for example, funders, partners, government, media, and the public. Each of the capacity dimensions is expected to have varying influence on the ability of an organization to fulfill its mission and achieve its objectives (Hall et al., 2003).

Dimensions of Capacity in Community Sport

Most research on community sport clubs has focused on a single dimension of capacity in any given study, with human resources and external relationships dominating the literature (see Misener & Doherty, 2009). A few investigations have considered multiple dimensions within a single study, relying on a list of factors investigators felt were most pertinent to the community sport context (Allison, 2001; Reid Howie Associates, 2006), or dimensions derived from a theoretical framework of organizational capacity (Gumulka, Barr, Lasby, & Brownlee, 2005; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Allison's (2001) and Reid Howie Associates' (2006) large-scale government-commissioned surveys of key issues in sport clubs in Scotland focused on human resources, finances, facilities, structure, and links with other organizations. Critical challenges to club development were formalization, facilities, and limited and unequal partnerships, particularly as alternate sources of funding (Allison, 2001; Reid Howie Associates, 2006).

Gumulka et al. (2005) focused on Hall et al.'s (2003) human resources and finances dimensions to describe the critical aspects of sport club capacity. They used data drawn

from a survey of Canadian nonprofit voluntary organizations in general. Critical factors were generating external revenue, recruiting and retaining the type of volunteers needed, and the dedication demonstrated by club volunteers focused on member needs (Gumulka et al., 2005). Drawing on data from a large-scale survey of sport clubs in Germany, Wicker and Breuer (2011) reported key "problems" experienced by those clubs. Scarcity of volunteers, access to sport facilities, and a growing imbalance of expenses to revenues were identified as critical factors in club capacity. However, Wicker and Breuer acknowledged that not all, or even the most relevant, sport club capacity elements were necessarily considered in their study.

Sharpe (2006) considered financial, human, and structural dimensions of capacity to describe the particular aspects of each that affect the quality of participants' experience in one grassroots sport organization. She concluded that a positive experience was compromised by a shortage of human capital, in terms of both volunteers and their skills and knowledge. Social capital inherent in structured relationships was a valuable and abundant resource within the organization. Sharpe urged further empirical attention to the role of human capital in grassroots organizations but, consistent with the multidimensional capacity perspective, noted that it should not be considered in isolation from other forms of capital. Misener and Doherty (2009) also based their case study of one community sport club on Hall et al.'s (2003) multidimensional model, uncovering what were perceived to be the critical elements within all five dimensions of capacity in that club. Critical human resources factors included a sufficient number of volunteers with positive attitudes, knowledge and skills, and a sense of trust and shared values. Financial factors included adequate and stable revenues, manageable expenses, and financial management. Frequent and open communication, a positive organizational culture, club formalization, and adequate facilities were identified as critical aspects of infrastructure. Strategic planning was acknowledged as critical to club goal achievement, although planning to date had been reactionary and informal. Finally, critical external relationship factors included connections with a variety of sport and nonsport partners and effective relationship management (Misener & Doherty, 2009). The current study builds on these efforts to date, examining the range of capacity dimensions outlined by Hall et al. with a broad sample of clubs.

Method

Participants

Fifty-one presidents, or their representatives, of community sport clubs participated in 1 of 13 focus groups in six communities across the province of Ontario. A total of 180 clubs representing a wide variety of team and individual, summer and winter sports were contacted by email from information available in the public domain (World Wide Web) and invited to participate in the study. A follow-up was conducted to determine interest and availability for a focus group session. Participants represented 23 different sports (13 team sports, 10 individual sports; 11 summer sports and 12 winter sports). Their clubs had been in existence for an average of 31 years ($SD = 2.82$), ranging from 5 to 106 years ($Mdn = 30$), with an average of 506 members, ranging from 22 to 4,800

(*Mdn* = 280). Less than half of the clubs (*n* = 23; 45%) had paid staff and only 12 (23.5%) of those had a paid administrator with the remainder in paid coaching, officiating, or food and beverage staff roles.

Focus Group Interview Guide and Procedure

Focus group interviews were used as they provide an environment for the discussion of phenomena that can elicit rich data as participants consider their own perspective in relation to others (Krueger & Casey, 2009). A semistructured interview guide was developed to tap into perceived strengths and challenges within each dimension of capacity, as indicators of key assets and resources. Club presidents were asked to reflect on the critical strengths or "best things" and critical challenges or "worst things" about a given dimension with respect to their club being able to achieve its goals, with one dimension discussed at a time. The focus group moderator, who was one of the investigators, encouraged all participants to contribute to the discussion and to elaborate on their comments. The focus group design enabled thoughtful reflection and engaging discussion among sport club presidents about capacity issues in their club. Participants would often reflect on someone else's description when recounting about their own club (e.g., "We're in a little different situation than [other club in the group] . . . " (FG12/2); "I think [other participant] hit it on the head. We're in the same set up . . . " (FG6/4)). The focus group interaction appeared to enhance the participants' ability to provide a rich description. The intent was not to achieve consensus within the group but to allow for interaction that could generate richer discussion. The moderator provided an oral summary at the end of each focus group, which enabled the group members to verify that their perspective had been included and the summary was accurate and complete (cf. Siegenthaler & Vaughan, 1998). Focus groups comprised three to six participants from different sports and clubs of different sizes (see below). The sessions lasted 90 min to 2 hr and were audio recorded. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and transcripts were stored in a secure venue, as per research ethics requirements of the first author's institution. Audiotapes were destroyed after transcription.

Data Analysis

A multistep approach was undertaken to identify patterns in the data across the full sample (Krueger & Casey, 2009). First, the transcripts were reviewed independently by the investigators for a general sense of the data. Next, the investigators reread the transcripts, scrutinizing individual phrases to create an emergent coding scheme that represented themes consistently identified by club presidents within each capacity dimension. Themes representing critical elements of capacity were evidenced by examples of strengths and/or challenges. Transcripts were then coded independently and discussions held to resolve any discrepancies between the investigators' coding, to verify code descriptors, and to collapse any codes that were deemed too similar. The data were also coded by club membership size to further consider any variation in the prominence of the capacity elements according to the number of members served. Nichols,

Table 1. Framework of Critical Elements of the Dimensions of Community Sport Club Capacity.

Capacity dimension	Critical elements
Human resources	Enthusiasm
	Human capital
	Common focus
	Sufficient volunteers
	Volunteer continuity
	Volunteer succession
	Development and support
Finance	Stable revenues
	Stable expenses
	Alternate sources of revenue
	Fiscal responsibility
Infrastructure	Formalization
	Communication
	Facilities
Planning and development	Strategic planning
	Creative planning
	Plan implementation
External relationships	Personal connection
	Engagement with partners
	Balanced relationships
	Dependable relationships
	Bureaucratic partners

Padmore, Taylor, and Barrett (2012) argued for empirically distinguishing types of sport clubs to better understand their respective characteristics, needs, and capabilities. Club size is one meaningful variable, given its high correlation with club income, expenditures, and number of volunteers (Nichols et al., 2012). Nichols et al.'s study focused on statistically clustering clubs according to club formality, and membership size was found to be associated with that variable. In the current sample, small clubs comprised less than 120 members ($n = 15$, 30%; $Mdn = 57$ members), medium-sized clubs were 120 to 400 members ($n = 18$, 35%; $Mdn = 231$ members), and large clubs were more than 400 members ($n = 18$, 35%; $Mdn = 885$ members), representing natural breaks in the sample. The groupings correspond with those of Reid Howie Associates (2006).

Findings and Discussion

The framework of organizational capacity represented by the various elements uncovered within each dimension is presented in Table 1 and elaborated below. Selected quotations that are representative of the views expressed by focus group participants are included to help illustrate the findings. Examples of strengths and challenges, as

indicative of critical elements, are included. The particular focus group and participant from whom a quotation is drawn are indicated in parentheses (FGX/Y).

Human Resources

As community sport clubs are predominantly run by volunteers, human resources generally refer to volunteers rather than staff. Seven critical elements that influence goal achievement were uncovered: (a) enthusiasm, (b) human capital, (c) common focus, (d) sufficient volunteers, (e) continuity, (f) succession, and (g) development and support.

Enthusiasm refers to the importance of individuals' passion, dedication, and energy for the club, the sport and the work to be done, as illustrated by the following quotations: "You just have to be passionate about what [the] kids are doing and want to be involved" (FG11/2), and "The people we have there are dynamite. We've got great ideas, lots of energy, not burned out, yet [laughs]" (FG9/5). In contrast, one president noted that "the challenge is the depth of the volunteer. They could do a great job but we would like them to grab hold . . . and do a little more" (FG4/2).

Human capital, or valued skills, knowledge, and experience pertaining to the club, the sport or particular tasks that need to be accomplished, was also critical to the clubs' goal achievement. While one club president noted that volunteers "who are very dedicated and want to do a lot" are a strength of her club, a critical challenge is that they do not have the necessary expertise (FG9/5). Another in the same focus group agreed, "if we're just putting warm bodies in the places, it's a problem" (FG9/6). Several presidents emphasized the importance of particular expertise, including administrative, organizational, and communication skills. Specific skills pertaining to technology and website development, and working with special populations (e.g., children with physical disabilities) were also noted.

A common focus or being "on the same page" with regard to the club's values and priorities was another important element. The specific nature of those values and priorities was not addressed in the focus groups; rather, the importance of everyone being in agreement was noted. The following quotations illustrate this element: "If they [board volunteers] don't all believe in the same thing and want the same thing then it's not going to work" (FG5/4), and "Right now, I would say that our biggest problem is that we have a lot of rogue volunteers and getting them to buy into what it is that we provide is tough" (FG9/6). The club presidents noted that volunteers who are primarily or even exclusively involved because of their personal interest in advancing their child in the sport, or moving the sport in a particular direction, limit the club's capacity to achieve its mandate; "they actually draw the organization down" (FG13/3).

Two seemingly connected elements were having sufficient volunteers and the continuity of volunteers. The first of these was described as having enough people, with enthusiasm and skills, knowledge and experience, as described above. One club president noted, "That can sometimes be challenging, but I think we've put enough of the right people in those roles and we've been fortunate enough to have the people to do that" (FG5/3). In contrast, another despaired, "Our critical problem is to try and pull

more new people who can be better organizers and to get us moving forward" (FG5/1). Relatedly, the element of continuity refers to the importance of valued volunteers staying with the club; something that was deemed particularly critical because of the continuity (or loss) of organizational knowledge. As described by one club president, when there is turnover "the system has to start all over again . . . the effectiveness of [the club] will take a step back and maybe drop down a notch" (FG4/1). While continuity was deemed critical to club capacity, the importance of volunteer succession with a smooth transition of volunteers in and out of key roles and ensuring that knowledge gets passed along when new people get involved was also noted. As one president explained, "I'm always thinking ahead . . . next season we are going to be losing 5-6 coaches so if I don't start looking for coaches now then we'll just be scrambling" (FG5/3).

Finally, there was consensus that providing development and support for volunteers and particularly coaches (e.g., certification) to do their work is critical to the ability of the club to achieve its goals. The focus on coaches in the sport context is consistent with their direct involvement in providing the core activity of these clubs. The importance of this aspect was further evidenced by several presidents who noted that developing coaches as well as officials (e.g., referees) is "a huge challenge for us" (FG1/4) because of the extra time and cost to do so, and the additional demands placed on these volunteers to engage in the training. Support included clubs trying to "do all of the administration" (FG9/2) so coaches are free to focus on their frontline role, ensuring coaches and volunteers have the necessary financial and sport-related resources (equipment, facilities) to do their work, and ensuring volunteers have enough interesting work to do to maintain and capitalize on their enthusiasm.

The findings extend Gumulka et al.'s (2005) and Misener and Doherty's (2009) observations regarding the importance of volunteers who are dedicated to their sport club, and complement Hoggett and Bishop's (1986) reference to the "enthusiasts" who run mutual aid leisure organizations. The findings also support the few studies that have identified the importance of particular skills, knowledge, and experience as critical to organizational capacity at the community sport level (Balduck, Van Rossem, & Buelens, 2010; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006). Together, they draw attention to the importance of volunteers' passion, energy, specific skills, and experience, moving beyond a consideration of what Hoggett and Bishop (1986) describe as "*surface characteristics*" of the volunteers of community sport clubs (i.e., demographics) to an understanding of the "*deeper structure* . . . the true nature and identity of any group" that reflects critical aspects that bear on club capacity for goal achievement (p. 101, italics in original).

Misener and Doherty (2009) found that shared values were critical to capacity in the community sport club they studied, coinciding with Enjolras's (2002) claim that shared values characterize this and presumably any type of membership association. The current study extends these findings by highlighting the importance of having consensus or common focus in the direction of volunteers' efforts for the club. This was identified as particularly important, given individual self-interests can undermine

club efforts, as they strive as membership associations to "support the interests of the collectivity" (Tschirhart, 2006, p. 524).

The elements of sufficient volunteers and continuity reflect the importance of having enough of the right volunteers, and the continued contribution of their skills, knowledge, expertise, and enthusiasm. Other community sport club research has indicated the importance of and struggle for sufficient volunteers (Gumulka et al., 2005; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2011), and thus the constant focus on recruitment and retention (see Cuskelly et al., 2006). The current study draws attention to the need to focus on having and keeping sufficient *valued* volunteers to enhance club capacity. It is interesting to consider these findings in the context of sport clubs as grassroots membership associations that draw volunteers almost exclusively from their members. A greater understanding of the membership itself, such as members' attitudes toward the club, their level of engagement, as well as their skills, knowledge, and experience, may be helpful to human resources capacity building efforts. Nonetheless, volunteers do leave clubs and the importance of being prepared to replace them, particularly those in key roles, was noted. This refines the conceptualization of organizational capacity as succession does not appear to have been addressed in sport club research. Volunteer development has also received relatively little empirical attention (see Cuskelly et al., 2006); however, the findings here highlight the clubs' acknowledgment of the need to support their human resources through training, adequate equipment, resources, and freedom to do their work.

Some variation in these elements based on club size was apparent. Notably, a sufficient number of enthusiastic volunteers, their continuity with the club, and a common focus among those volunteers were important to relatively more medium and large clubs than those with fewer members. Bigger clubs means more members to serve and programs to coordinate and deliver. It also means more members to draw on as volunteers; however, research indicates that in sport clubs (Doherty, 2005; Taylor, 2004) and many types of membership associations (cf. Hoggett & Bishop, 1986), "fewer volunteers are doing more work" (Doherty, 2005, p. 10). There is not necessarily a linear relationship between the number of members and the availability, engagement and continuity of volunteers with the passion and energy to impact on the club's capacity to achieve its goals. In fact, there may be greater barriers to members volunteering in larger organizations (Cuskelly et al., 2006). The mechanisms underlying this variation should be examined. The variation in common focus, however, may be a direct function of the relatively greater number of volunteers in larger clubs (Nichols et al., 2012) and the greater diversity of interests that brings. Self-interest may be more manifest in these clubs and thus the ability to focus on a common direction is seen as critical to the clubs' capacity.

The importance of volunteer development and support was also indicated by relatively more large clubs. Its prominence for club capacity may align with the importance of sufficient and continuing volunteers in large clubs. Training and development and support for volunteers' to do their work may be expected to be viewed very positively by volunteers and thus an enticement to be involved. The relatively greater

importance of this element to large clubs may also be consistent with their financial and logistical ability to even think about providing such support.

Finances

Four critical elements of the finances dimension pertained to (a) stable revenues, (b) stable expenses, (c) alternate sources of revenues, and (d) fiscal responsibility. The presidents noted the importance of being able to rely on stable revenues every year, the large majority of which comes from membership fees. There was little if any discussion of having enough revenues, or absolute amounts; rather, steady or predictable income, from memberships, sponsorship, and/or fund-raising, was deemed most critical. As one president explained, "We have one big [membership] income stream at the beginning of the year and then we know what we're dealing with" (FG1/2). In contrast, another in the same focus group noted the challenge when "revenue drops because membership [isn't] there [yet] we still have committed expenses to coaching and [facility rental] to cover" (FG1/4). Some presidents also noted the instability of sponsorships and thus the "huge challenge every year we have to get new sponsors" (FG10/2). Relatedly, having stable, predictable expenses from year to year was indicated as another critical element of club capacity, including being "able to forecast" (FG3/4) and knowing what "the town is going to be charging us for the following year" (FG10/3).

Club presidents also identified having access to, and using, alternate sources of revenue as a critical element. Being able to attract revenue sources beyond membership fees, including fund-raising, donations, and grants, was a particular strength, while lack of such sources, or failing to take advantage of them, was a noted weakness. There were several examples of fund-raising ventures, ranging from tournament hosting and concession stands to selling advertising space on the club website or tournament programs, and "renting" club facility time (i.e., rink, pool) to outside athletes to help recoup costs. Acquiring alternate revenues was seen as critical to supplementing membership fees.

Fiscal responsibility was another critical element of finances, particularly engaging in sound financial management practices and ensuring a balanced budget. Controlling costs, being aware of cash flow, and thorough bookkeeping were examples of practices that enhanced the ability of the club to do its work. The importance of having a reserve or contingency fund in place was also widely discussed.

While Allison (2001) noted the general financial struggle faced by sport clubs, the current study highlights specific aspects that bear on the clubs' ability to achieve their goals. The importance of financial stability and responsible budgeting also extends the work of Misener and Doherty (2009) and Wicker and Breuer (2011). Most grassroots organizations operate on relatively modest budgets to which any deviations could have important consequences; for example, inability to pay rental expenses or referee costs, and further financial demands on members through increased fees. Consistent with Gumulka et al. (2005) and Reid Howie Associates (2006), acquiring alternate revenue

sources was identified as a critical challenge, reinforcing it as key to club goal achievement.

The importance of alternate sources and fiscal responsibility was consistent across all sizes of clubs. However, stable revenues and particularly stable expenses appeared to be important to relatively more large clubs. Larger organizations normally expect to experience risks on a larger scale (Slack, 1997), and thus concerns about revenues and expenditures are likely magnified when those numbers are higher as well.

Infrastructure

The elements of (a) formalization, (b) communication, and (c) facilities were identified as critical to community sport club capacity. Focus group participants consistently described the importance of a formal board structure and constitution, written policies and procedures for the board, volunteers, coaches, and players, as well as clearly defined roles. These operational components allow for standardized practices. As one club president reported, "We have a beautiful set of policies and procedures. So we have the framework in place so we could grow" (FG5/2). Another reinforced the importance of formalization by noting that

> [volunteers] can be so gung-ho with so much energy that they forget there is a process and procedure for things. We do have a constitution. There are minutes to be taken . . . You have to pull them in sometimes. (FG8/1)

While not all sport clubs were characterized by such formality, it was seen as an important element of infrastructure: "[We] are very weak in the way [we] sometimes conduct business . . . If you don't have your checks and balances, it can cause some really big problems later on" (FG9/1).

Communication was identified as another critical element, and specifically engaging in regular, up-to-date, and two-way information exchange with volunteers and members about club plans, programs, and issues. As one club president noted, "With us it's all about informing people and letting them know what's going on and making them feel part of the club. And they have a say in the club . . . We are very transparent" (FG8/2). Another reinforced this by noting, "We definitely keep the communication with the people as much as possible because if we don't the club will slowly fall apart" (FG2/1). Yet a few focus group participants noted lack of communication, particularly among volunteers, as a critical challenge; for example, one noted that "the disconnect of coaches, I would say is [the] number one [challenge]" (FG1/2), while another shared that "scheduling meetings is a huge problem for us" (FG1/3). A club president summed up the importance of this element when he stated that, "Communication is probably one of our greatest strengths when it works well and it's probably our greatest weakness when it's not going well" (FG5/4).

Availability and quality of facilities was another critical element of infrastructure. Presidents described suitable and sufficient access to facilities that are in good condition and safe for sport participants as a particular strength of their clubs (or a challenge

when such conditions are not met). As one president noted, "The [facility we use] it's amazingly small . . . [we have] 25 [athletes] 14 years and older doing pushups . . . we need an expansion because we cannot get any more kids because there is not room" (FG3/2). Another described the challenge of limited or no access to suitable facilities: "Our kids swim in pools that are too small . . . Swim Ontario won't even recognize any swim [competitions] that we do in that pool" (FG6/1).

Like other grassroots associations (Smith, 2000), community sport clubs have traditionally been informally structured (Taylor, 2004). However, the trend toward a more "contemporary" formalized structure (Allison, 2001; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Reid Howie Associates, 2006), that is presumed to enable clubs to address increasing pressures more efficiently and effectively (Nichols et al., 2012; Taylor, 2004), is supported in the current study with the focus on the importance of formalization. The focus on communication for club success may not be surprising, given the need for these membership associations to understand and effectively interact with members as their primary stakeholders. It may also reflect the clubs' intent to maintain a membership association based on participation (rather than consumerism; Enjolras, 2002), with programs organized and delivered "by some of us, for all of us" (Hoggett & Bishop, 1986, p. 41).

The findings also substantiate facilities as one of the most important challenges facing sport clubs (cf. Allison, 2001; Harris et al., 2009; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Reid Howie Associates, 2006; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Many sport clubs require specialized facilities, such as a pool, ice rink, basketball court, or rowing venue, to deliver their programs; yet, most do not possess their own facilities (Allison, 2001; Nichols et al., 2012). Notably, the current study revealed safe facilities of suitable quality for program delivery as a capacity issue rather than merely availability or access to those facilities. Further analysis revealed that formalization, communication, and facilities appear to be critical to the capacity of the clubs to achieve their respective goals regardless of club size. While Nichols et al. (2012) found the degree of club formalization to vary directly with club size, it was no more important among larger clubs than smaller clubs in the current study.

Planning and Development

The critical elements of this dimension focused on (a) strategic planning, (b) creativity in that planning, and (c) plan implementation. Presidents discussed the importance of having a vision and direction for the future and engaging in long-term planning. Not all clubs were engaged in such planning largely because of the need to focus on day-to-day operations, which the presidents noted created a particular challenge for club performance. They also talked about the importance of a creative planning process, where the club is open to new ideas and actively tries to "think outside the box." The presidents also described the actual implementation of a strategic plan as a particular capacity challenge or weakness, and thus something that is missing but critical to their club. Reasons given for not following strategic plans included, again, a heavy focus on day-to-day operations, lack of sufficiently skilled and enthusiastic human resources, and what was perceived to be a lack of financial and physical resources.

Taylor (2004) contended that strategic planning is critical to community sport club development, and Misener and Doherty (2009) found this to be the case in the club they examined. Strategy is not uncommon in nonprofit organizational capacity models (e.g., Lusthaus et al., 2002; McKinsey & Company, 2001; Sobeck & Agius, 2007; Sowa et al., 2004). However, research to date in the community sport context suggests that it is just beginning to be recognized as an important dimension, with the identification here of a fundamental need for planning, the creative nature of such planning, and the ultimate step of implementation. This fundamental need was consistently apparent across the different sizes of clubs, further highlighting it as critical to the capacity of community sport clubs to achieve their goals.

External Relationships

Five critical elements of capacity regarding relationships with external organizations were revealed: (a) personal connections, (b) relationships that are engaged, (c) balanced relationships, (d) dependable relationships, and (e) bureaucratic partners. Presidents noted the importance of establishing at least some of their club partnerships (e.g., sponsors, facility providers) through personal connections in the community; "I know the lady [at the local newspaper]" (FG9/3), "[We had a] parent contact to get in there" (FG5/3), "We had a member of their board on our board" (FG1/3), and "Our head coach has that whole network out there" (FG5/2) are a few examples of personal connections that were perceived to positively influence the clubs' ability to form and maintain relationships and thus impact their work.

The presidents talked about the importance of being actively engaged within the partnership where the club is attentive to its partners and two-way communication exists. For example, one president described his club's relationship with the managers of the facility they rent:

> We have worked really close with them . . . by communicating with them and not putting unrealistic demands on them as far as [rental times]. We have tried to be more approachable and they have become more approachable for us. (FG8/1)

This quotation gives a sense of another critical relationship element which is clubs' partnerships being balanced and fair in terms of give-and-take, where "you [do] not feel taken advantage of" (FG8/1). A fourth critical element was relationship dependability. As an example, one club president described the mutual trust that had built up between his club and the schools whose gyms they use:

> When something goes wrong in the schools, a broken [basketball] rim or a propped [open] door or something like that, we've got a good enough relationship that they recognize that we're good for it. They can talk to us about it and we talk to them. (FG9/2)

Still another president expressed his frustration with the club's inability to rely on the city for facility bookings that tend to get mislaid or not processed.

Bureaucratic partners that are inflexible and highly formalized represent the final element of capacity in this dimension. Partners described as bureaucratic included city hall, local media, provincial sport organizations, and lottery/gaming commissions (for fund-raising). Two presidents described the challenges of working with these types of organizations: "It's difficult for us to get through the school board system" (FG1/1), and "It's very frustrating dealing with [the city] . . . the higher in the city you get the more political stuff gets involved" (FG2/1).

The importance of personal contacts for community sport club partnerships was also identified by Misener and Doherty (2012), who noted that these connections represent the mobilization of social capital. Sharpe (2006) highlighted the importance of social capital for club development, and the personal connections described here and in Misener and Doherty (2012) appear to be illustrative of the importance of this particular resource.

The importance of engaged, balanced, and dependable relationships is consistent with Misener and Doherty's (2009) case study observation that effectively managing external relationships is essential; a finding that was echoed in a subsequent study specific to partnerships (Misener & Doherty, 2012). Notably, unbalanced partnerships were a critical issue for the sport clubs in Allison's (2001) study. Together these findings provide insight into particular aspects of external relationships that bear on club goal achievement, namely, capitalizing on personal connections, and ensuring involved, fair, and trustworthy relationships. These considerations may be particularly critical in the face of community sport clubs' increasing reliance on external partners for survival (cf. Misener & Doherty, 2012; Wicker & Breuer, 2011). Interestingly, while formalization was a critical element of infrastructure for clubs, the ability to recognize and respond to the bureaucracy that comes from highly formalized partners is another important factor in club capacity. This condition has not been identified in other sport club research and advances the conceptualization of organizational capacity in this context.

The elements that reflect the nature of the relationship (engaged, balanced, dependable) were consistently critical across all clubs, highlighting the importance of nurturing partnerships that are fair and trusting regardless of club size. In contrast, personal connections were important to fostering relationships that enhance club capacity in relatively more large clubs. This may be a function of the greater number of members these clubs are able to draw on for personal contacts and thus is something of which they are more aware. Also, dealing with bureaucratic partners was important to the capacity of relatively more medium and large clubs than smaller clubs. The degree of formalization reportedly found with increasing club size (Nichols et al., 2012; even though it was consistently important across clubs in this study) may be associated with a greater likelihood of relationships with bureaucratic partners, based on opportunity, necessity, and/or ability to engage with such partners. As such, challenges associated with such partners would be more prevalent for these clubs; a possibility that warrants further consideration.

Concluding Comments

Although community sport clubs are "at one and the same time ubiquitous, complex and poorly understood" (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003, p. 24), they are like other small

grassroots member associations that have tended to fall "under most researchers' radar screens" (Tschirhart, 2006, p. 525). The current study thus makes an important contribution by uncovering a framework that provides a rich understanding of the range of resources that community sport clubs draw on to achieve their goals. The further consideration of variation by club size provides even richer insight into apparent similarities and differences in the relative importance of these resources according to the number of members served in these grassroots associations. The findings also advance our understanding of organizational capacity broadly, beyond the specific field of study. The framework highlights context-specific elements, as expected (Christensen & Gazley, 2008; Wing, 2004), while the apparent nuances by organization size prompt further consideration of the possible complexity of organizational capacity.

The framework has implications for helping to focus the assessment of relevant capacity elements and further capacity building in the sport club context. The elements within each dimension provide a roadmap for policy makers and practitioners to direct their efforts toward strengthening particular aspects of human resources, finances, infrastructure, planning and development, and external relationships. The critical elements, identified by community sport clubs themselves, can help focus resources and efforts that are already so stretched in these grassroots membership associations.

The diverse sample of community sport clubs in the study, and examples of both strengths and challenges as indications of critical capacity elements, enhances the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of such clubs. However, the framework uncovered here needs to be verified with a larger sample of sport clubs. Further to that, research may examine the relative strength and weakness of the elements, including any variation by club type (e.g., size, age, number of volunteers, urban vs. rural location), to generate an even richer understanding of organizational capacity in this context. The club size groupings considered here are reflective of the sample and thus findings should be considered preliminary. Future research should also examine the relative impact of each dimension and its elements on club goal achievement, to test the purported relationship between those elements and club capacity and to provide further direction for capacity building efforts. Multidimensional frameworks of capacity in other types of membership associations should also be explored as these nonprofit organizations are an important part of the fabric of the community and merit the insight and understanding that systematic inquiry brings. Hall et al.'s (2003) model was a useful foundation for the current study as the relevance of each dimension was affirmed and critical elements were identified within each. The model may be expected to be valuable to similar investigations of capacity in other grassroots membership associations.

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Author Biographies

Alison Doherty is a professor in the Sport Management program at Western University, and editor of *Sport Management Review* (2013-2016). Her research focuses on nonprofit and community sport organization capacity.

Katie Misener is an assistant professor of Sport Management in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. The focus of her research is the development and social impact of community sport.

Graham Cuskelly is a professor (Tourism, Sport and Hotel Management) and dean (Research) of the Griffith Business School. His research focus is sport volunteerism and community development.