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*Strategic planning for membership growth in nonprofit community sport*

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**Project Summary**

Community sport organizations (CSOs), such as local soccer and volleyball clubs, are non-profit, membership-based organizations that provide pathways for affordable and accessible sport participation opportunities (Doherty et al., 2014). CSOs are typically governed by a volunteer board of directors responsible for managing both the day-to-day operational tasks as well as long-term strategic direction of the organization (Hoye et al., 2019). While a growing body of evidence suggests that CSOs are engaging in professional management practices (e.g., Nichols et al., 2015; Seippel, 2019; Tiusanen, 2018), CSOs have been criticized for using a problem-solving style that is reactive and pragmatic, rather than proactive and strategic (Seippel et al., 2020).

The role of CSOs is particularly important to the health and wellbeing of Canadian communities in a time when sport participation is declining (Canadian Heritage, 2013; Eime et al., 2015; The Aspen Institute, 2018). While CSOs provide critical access to recreation and competitive sport opportunities, they also face multiple capacity challenges, such as rising cost of infrastructure, competition for funding and access to quality facilities, and reliance on volunteers (e.g., Doherty & Cuskelly, 2019; Wicker et al., 2012).

This multi-phase research project sought to advance our understanding of strategic planning for membership growth in nonprofit community sport. Phase I examined the environmental factors that drove CSO leaders' decision to engage in strategic planning to achieve the purported purpose of membership growth. The findings highlighted various environmental pressures and managerial actions that influenced the use of strategic planning, including a club's community profile, inter-club competition, and the expectations of governing bodies, influenced strategic planning in CSOs. Other critical conditions that influenced strategic planning include a supportive organizational culture and organizational capacity.

Phase II examined the different strategic approaches to membership growth among CSOs. Findings highlighted the factors that CSO leaders considered when formulating their strategies, including organizational capacity, congruence, market turbulence, and competitive intensity. These factors were grouped together into two dimensions that represented the environment in which CSOs operated, including organizational readiness for growth (internal environment) and environmental dynamism (external environment). CSO leaders' perceptions of whether their club's environment was captured as high or low on these dimensions provided insight into their strategic approaches to membership growth. Four strategic approaches to

membership growth were identified, including Trailblazers, Enhancers, Maintainers, and Carers.

Phase III examined how CSO leaders engaged in a strategic planning process by examining the role of strategic planning champions (i.e., the individuals who lead the strategic planning process) and their choice of activities. Findings highlight four roles that strategic planning champions hold within their clubs (i.e., consultant, board member, staff member, facilitator) and three general types of activities (i.e., observation of environment, solicitation of feedback, active engagement of stakeholders) that indicate varying levels of stakeholder involvement in planning.

Overall, the findings from this project emphasize the importance of engaging in strategic planning for membership growth and the consideration of the alignment between each CSO's unique environment and the membership growth strategies they pursue.

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## **Research Methods**

The three-phase research project used multiple qualitative research methods. Phase I involved a multiple case study approach, involving six CSOs that self-identified as following a strategic plan focused on increasing membership. These clubs represented a variety of membership trends and organizational sizes/structures. Semi-structured interviews with the club president or their representative (e.g., Executive Director) were conducted, as were focus groups with the board of directors and staff members (if applicable). Strategic plan documents were also collected and analyzed alongside the interviews in order to provide background information about why strategic planning was used.

Phase II involved semi-structured interviews with 15 CSO presidents or their representatives that indicated that they were following a strategic plan focused on growing their membership. Strategic plan documents were also collected and analyzed.

Finally, Phase III involved a multiple case study design, involving four CSOs that self-identified as engaging in strategic planning for membership growth. These cases were purposefully selected in order to provide contrasting examples of various approaches to strategic planning. Semi-structured interviews with the president or their representative and focus groups with board members and staff (if applicable) were conducted and analyzed to provide a range of insights about the strategic planning process. Strategic plan documents were also collected and analyzed alongside the interviews in order to inform our understanding of strategic planning in the CSOs.

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## **Research Results**

Strategic planning is important for contemporary CSOs, and the findings from this research project highlighted the need for sport leaders to take an individualized approach to strategic planning for membership growth. In other words, there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach, and club leaders need to understand and account for their unique circumstances when developing a strategic plan. Specifically, the findings from Phase I indicated that key

environmental factors need to be considered, including (1) the profile of the community that the club operates in (e.g., aging or declining population, housing market); (2) inter-club competition (e.g., alternative sport participation opportunities within the community); (3) expectations from governing bodies (e.g., pressures to align with the strategic priorities of provincial or national sport organizations); (4) supportive organizational culture (e.g., common belief that strategic planning is valuable and club-wide buy-in to the use of strategic planning); and (5) organizational capacity (e.g., having an experienced and knowledgeable individual willing to champion strategic planning, having adequate financial resources and access to sport facility infrastructure). These findings underscore the importance of understanding the factors that influence strategic planning so that CSO leaders can uncover areas for growth, anticipate challenges, and effectively engage in strategic planning.

Findings from Phase II highlighted how environmental factors (i.e., organizational capacity, congruence, market turbulence, and competitive intensity) shaped the different approaches to membership growth pursued by CSOs. Four different strategic approaches were identified, including: (1) a Trailblazer approach (i.e., focused on differentiating their organization from the competition through diversification of programs); (2) an Enhancer approach (i.e., focused on developing new marketing methods to introduce their sport to potential members); (3) a Maintainer approach (i.e., focused on optimizing existing programs and services); and (4) a Carer approach (i.e., focused on engaging in social action to attract and retain members with similar interests). Findings suggest that there are different strategic approaches that can be used based on the values and vision a club has. Further, it is important that CSO leaders are attentive to their environment when developing strategies because, in doing so, they may be able to identify opportunities and threats that allow them to proactively adapt to environmental changes and gain a competitive advantage.

Finally, the findings from Phase III revealed four different roles that strategic planning champions hold within their clubs (e.g., external consultants, board, staff, and facilitators) and three general types of strategy activities that they engage in as part of the strategic planning process (i.e., observation of the environment, solicitation of feedback, and active engagement of stakeholders). These findings emphasized the importance of considering the individual(s) who will lead the strategic planning process and the different ways that stakeholders can be included in the process. The solicitation of stakeholder feedback appeared to be a particularly critical aspect of strategic planning as it helped strategic planning champions get a sense of the club culture and values as well as expectations of members, which are all important aspects in developing strategic priorities. Thus, it is important to consider how the strategic planning process can be modified to involve stakeholders in meaningful ways.

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### **Policy and Program Implications**

Findings highlighted the importance for CSO leaders to assess their club's environment prior to engaging in strategic planning, as congruence between the environment, membership growth strategies, and organizational structure is important and may influence the effectiveness of strategic planning. Moreover, these findings emphasized the importance of making an informed

choice of who will lead strategic planning (e.g., board, staff, consultant, facilitator) and to consider when and how to meaningfully engage club stakeholders in the planning process.

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### **Next Steps**

Future research will examine whether the four strategic approaches to membership growth (e.g., Trailblazer, Enhancer, Maintainer, Carer) adequately represent the variety of approaches to membership growth among CSOs, and whether there are additional aspects of CSOs' environment that influence the strategies they adopt (e.g., "late-entry" sports vs "early specialization" sports). The relationships between the different approaches to membership growth and desired organizational outcomes, such as actual membership growth, resiliency, and performance will also be examined.

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### **Knowledge Translation**

Executive reports were generated for each of the participating CSOs, and findings were also presented at the Parks and Recreation Ontario (PRO) Educational Forum & Trade Show as well as at the Sport Canada Research Initiative Conference, both of which attract and engage researchers, practitioners, and policy makers. I intend to further disseminate findings to CSOs through the production of blogs/articles (e.g., The Conversation, SIRCuit). Several academic presentations and publications have also been produced.

The report may be of interest to CSO leaders who are considering how to best engage in strategic planning, particularly for membership growth. Sport Canada may wish to disseminate this report directly to CSOs, and/or to NSOs and PSOs who can then implement strategies to help support their member clubs' strategic planning processes.

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