

# COUSENS, LAURA

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## *Examining Interdependence in Canada's Sport System: Community Basketball*

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### **Project Summary**

The purpose of this research was to explore and assess the existence of partnerships or network collaborations within the delivery network of basketball providers in one geographic region of Canada: Niagara. Investigators used network analysis to investigate the degree of integration (incidents of network collaboration) and interdependence (partnership effectiveness) between providers of sport (e.g., basketball clubs, Boys and Girls Clubs, Parks and Recreation Departments) in one geographic region. The specific objectives of the research were: to identify the providers of the sport of basketball in one geographic region of Canada; to identify the location (central, periphery) of each actor in the network of providers, as well as the level of connectedness (density) of the network; to identify the conditions that have facilitated or hindered collaboration and integration in the networks; and to explore the environmental context (normative, regulative, cognitive) of the networks.

The study revealed a fragmented network wherein the number of actual linkages among the organizations was low (one third of all possible linkages,) with organizations working independently rather than fully exploiting opportunities for collaboration. The referees association was situated at the centre of the network given its control over a key resource, referees, valued by each of the basketball clubs.

The dedicated basketball clubs were more tightly coupled to one another than to the nonprofit organizations (e.g. Boys & Girls club; YMCA) or to the educational institutions (e.g., post secondary).

Reasons for lack of integration among local providers of basketball included:

- need for control over decision-making in the club;
- challenge of securing buy-in from other clubs to partner;
- challenges associated with working with volunteer boards of directors;
- rivalry between local clubs for athletes, facilities, and financial resources;
- lack of volunteer time and expertise to establish and manage partnerships;
- lack of realization of the economies of scale (e.g., lower administrative overhead for marketing, registration, and facility booking) available through collaboration;
- fear of uncertainty and of making long-term commitments to other organizations; and
- need to hire paid staff to manage relationships with key partners/stakeholders.
- mechanisms that facilitated collaboration uncovered:
- friendships that facilitate the use of 'social capital' to acquire resources;
- assigning board members to manage relationships with key partners/stakeholders;

- Hiring paid staff to manage relationships with sponsors, facility providers, and with the referees association;
  - Establishing a framework for collaboration based upon shared goals and values; and
  - Leveraging informal contacts in the basketball community to initiate partnerships.
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### **Research Methods**

Quantitative data was collected using a five-page survey adapted from Provan, Harvey, and Guernsey de Zpaian's (1995). Questions surrounding the reasons for linkages between basketball providers were drawn from the literature on community sport organizations, and included links to share information, resources, marketing, and fundraising. Respondents were asked to indicate the organizations to which they were linked from a list of basketball providers. Additional questions related to organizational goals and structure, barriers to collaboration, and key players in the community who facilitated or hindered collaboration. 11 out of 12 organizations completed the questionnaire. Data were analyzed using the UCINET 6 network analysis software (Borgatti, Everett & Freeman, 2002).

Qualitative data were collected via 11 in-depth guided interviews with basketball providers at the local, provincial, and national levels. Individuals contacted for interviews included two university basketball coaches, senior administrators or members of the board of directors of local clubs, the leaders of recreation basketball programs, as well as representatives from Canada Basketball and Ontario Basketball. Questions were posed to gain a deeper understanding of the inter-organizational relationships that existed – or did not exist - among the clubs or with other key resource providers. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and member-checked by the interviewee for content accuracy. Each member of the research team read the data to identify codes, patterns and relationships.

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### **Research Results**

**Power and dependence:** Local clubs' efforts to maintain power over critical areas of their operations hindered opportunities for collaboration, not only with other local clubs, but with governance bodies in the broader environment encompassing the sport of basketball. The clubs were highly dependent upon others in their environment for virtually all of the critical resources needed to operate.

**Industry rivalry:** Dedicated basketball clubs clearly identify themselves as rivals in this local market, competing for athletes, volunteers, facilities, and financial resources from local governments or sponsors. Low barriers to entry (e.g., easy for start-up clubs to enter the market), and high levels of uncertainty in relation to facility access and funding from sponsors intensified industry rivalry among local basketball clubs.

**Reliance on normative processes:** In the case of dedicated basketball providers, it appears that some level of cooperation has arisen through normative processes that are embedded in the social relationships in this community. It appears that social norms were used as the basis of behaviors by the majority of the providers. Accordingly, the threat of punishment or sanctions (e.g., limit access to referees or facilities) worked in support of cooperative behavior.

**Managing interdependence:** Linkages with other organizations involve commitments, obligations, and a greater degree of inter-organizational interdependence that necessitates internal coordination. However, the

managerial structures needed to effectively integrate inter-organizational activities were largely absent in dedicated basketball clubs. Some clubs were moving towards adopting a more structured approach to managing relationships by creating dedicated positions to facilitate interactions. Informal (e.g., friendships) means were also used to manage inter-organizational interdependence.

The results of this research are not generalizable to a broader array of individual and/or seasonal sports; however they do highlight resource constraints that are typical of many community sport clubs.

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### **Policy Implications**

- Establish, at the provincial level, a regional framework for local, same-sport clubs; one that limits club rivalry among existing clubs and creates barriers to entry for new clubs that lack specified governance frameworks and organizational structures.
  - Mandate strategic planning by local sport clubs. Emphasize strategies to reduce uncertainty through long-term contracts or relationships with facility providers (municipal governments, schools) and/or corporate sponsors. The capacity of local sport clubs to increase participation is severely limited by uncertain access to facilities.
  - Mandate a prescribed governance structure for local sport clubs.
  - Provide incentives for collaborative structures, such as sport councils, that will alter the power and dependence relationships between sport clubs and their key suppliers.
  - Create, at the municipal level, liaison mechanisms (staff, processes) that enable local sport clubs that use municipal facilities to manage their power/dependence, and to enhance communication.
  - Provide a framework for longer-term access (3 to 5 years) to facilities to enable sport clubs to enhance participation through planned growth strategies.
  - Develop a strategic plan for regional sport facilities that considers the facilities owned by local governments, private companies, and non-profit organizations. Consider non-traditional venues such as churches, outside spaces, and refurbished industrial buildings.
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### **Next Steps**

- What are the normative processes used by local sport clubs to manage their interdependence with resource providers and competitors?
  - How do coalitions of sport organizations, such as Sport Councils, serve as mechanisms to manage the relationships among community sport clubs and their resource providers?
  - How do networks encompassing nonprofit providers of sport compare to networks encompassing private and public-sector providers of sport programs?
  - Which organizational structures facilitate or hinder collaboration and integration among community sport clubs and their resource providers?
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### **Key Stakeholders and Benefits**

- Local governments (in particular Parks and Recreation Departments)
- Provincial Sport Organizations
- National Sport Organizations
- Sport Councils (Commissions)