A Typology of Strategic Approaches to Membership Growth in Nonprofit Community Sport

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Community sport organizations (CSOs), such as hockey clubs, minor baseball associations, and swimming clubs, provide accessible and affordable sport participation pathways for local communities (Doherty et al., 2014). CSO leaders must formulate and implement effective organizational strategies in order to counter the trend of sport participation stagnancy or decline seen across Canada and other countries (e.g., CFLRI, 2019; The Aspen Institute, 2018). Understanding how CSO leaders perceive and respond to their environment is critical for the survival of these local nonprofits (Bryson et al., 2018; O’Brien et al., 2019; Pettigrew, 2012). To date, empirical work on nonprofit sport organizations’ strategy has focused on strategic change and board capability in National Sport Organizations (e.g., Amis et al., 2004; Berrett & Slack, 2001; Ferkins & Shilbury, 2012; Ferkins et al., 2005, 2009). There remains an important gap in research examining the specific strategies CSOs use to grow their membership base and how their environment (e.g., demographic changes, competition, market and demographic trends) may shape the types of strategies that they adopt (e.g., Slack & Berrett, 2001; Thibault et al., 1993, 1994).

The current study is part of a broader research project informed by the literature on nonprofit strategic management (e.g., Bryson et al., 2018; Thibault & Hinings, 1993, 1994). The project seeks to understand the nature of strategy in the community sport context by examining strategy 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, 1987, 2012). The purpose of this particular study is to develop a typology for understanding the strategic approaches that CSOs utilize to grow their membership in relation to how they interpret their environment. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What strategies do CSOs use to grow their membership base

2. How do CSOs’ strategic approaches for membership growth reflect their context?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Presidents of Ontario-based CSOs from a variety of sports (N=15) that self-identified as having a strategic plan focused on increasing club membership. The interview guide was developed to elicit insights about participating club’s strategic priorities, values, response to societal or demographic trends and competition, and organizational characteristics (e.g., structure, age, membership trends). Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed following Merriam and Tisdell (2015)’s inductive open and axial coding procedures. In order to generate insight into each club’s strategic priorities and initiatives, strategic plan documents were also collected and analyzed alongside the interview data.

The findings revealed two environmental dimensions that influenced strategy, including: organizational readiness for growth (reflected by congruence with club culture and organizational capacity) and environmental dynamism (reflected by competitive intensity and market turbulence. These two dimensions were then used to create a matrix of four strategic types: Trailblazers, Enhancers, Maintainers, and Carers. Each strategic type will be described in detail during the presentation and implications for theory and management practice will be discussed.