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# Managing sport for social change: The effects of intentional design and structure in a sport-based service learning initiative



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## ABSTRACT

The current study focused on addressing a gap in understanding the design, structure, and management of sport-for-development (SFD) initiatives, in this case an initiative rooted in sport-based service learning. Sport, and specifically SFD, has been shown to facilitate positive outcomes such as social capital development through expanding networks and community building. Some studies have focused on impacts on volunteers in sport and SFD programs. These volunteers have developed networks most often through informal relationship building activities. Building on this knowledge, the current mixed methods study investigated the social capital development of alumni of a college service learning through sport course. Survey data ( $n=93$ ) and individual interviews ( $n=22$ ) with participants who had completed at least one semester in the course indicated that social capital development was facilitated. In particular, the intentional design, structure, and management aspects of the course and program provided opportunities for social capital development.

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## 1. Introduction

Sport provides an avenue for relationship and network development among community members (Sherry, Karg, & O'May, 2011; Smith & Westerbeek, 2007), especially in ethnically and socio-economically diverse groups (Burnett, 2006; Jarvie, 2003). Putnam's (2005) conceptualization of social capital, which focuses on the development of networks, norms, and social trust within organizations and communities, has been used in sport and leisure research (e.g., Tonts, 2005; Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2013a). Results have indicated that sport allows for the development of bonding and bridging social capital for participants (Sherry, 2010; Sherry & Strybosch, 2012; Tonts, 2005) and other stakeholders (Burnett, 2006;

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Schulenkorf, Thomson, & Schlenker, 2011). Sport-for-development (SFD) programs attempt to use sport as a medium to effect positive change in society through promoting intercultural exchange, conflict resolution, peace building, and assisting marginalized populations (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Preliminary studies indicate that volunteers in SFD programs have experienced positive outcomes, including expanded networks (Burnett, 2006) and building community and social capital (Welty Peachey et al., 2013a). Similarly, while not volunteers in the strictest sense, college students enrolled in service learning courses that encompass SFD have also been found to experience positive outcomes, including increased cultural understanding, community connection, and enhanced cooperation among diverse group members (Bruening et al., in press; Bruening, Madsen, Evanovich, & Fuller, 2010).

In volunteer-driven SFD contexts, social capital development is organic. It is often initiated from the volunteers as opposed to facilitated by the structure of the event, which is focused more on the participants the SFD program aims to serve (Welty Peachey et al., 2013a). Thus, many volunteers engage in informal relationship building activities and expand their networks throughout the sport event or activity. However, questions remain concerning the ability of SFD programs to be explicitly designed to further increase or improve the rate of social capital development among all participants. This also includes those the programs serve, volunteers, and in the case of the current research, college student leaders in a SFD-focused service learning course. Service learning programs are one structural design that may allow for social capital development.

Service learning programs are course-based and credit-bearing. They combine an organized community service component with designed reflection opportunities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). Service learning programs have been found to enhance student cultural competency (Baldwin, Buchanan, & Rudisill, 2007; Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Davi, 2007; Enfeld & Collins, 2008) and serve as a possible foundation for social capital development.

Few service learning through sport programs exist (Bennett, Henson, & Drane, 2003; Jackowski & Gullion, 1998; Lee, Bush, & Smith, 2005), likely due to the intensive and time consuming nature of building and maintaining sport-based community programs for both students and faculty (Bruening et al., 2010). However, the integration of service learning and sport could enhance social relationships and assist marginalized populations. In this sense, organizations can structure sport programs to facilitate positive outcomes such as social capital (Burnett, 2006) but such outcomes are dependent upon the specific design of programs. Not all program designs will produce desired outcomes (Astin & Sax, 1998). Few service learning SFD programs have been analyzed, and it is unclear how the design and structure of such programs might lead to positive outcomes (e.g., social capital development) for the students involved. Therefore, examining the design, structure, and management of service learning programs that are framed as SFD addresses a gap in the literature. The current study aims to address the lack of understanding of the impact of service learning SFD programs on the social capital development of those who deliver the programs. And, in particular, this study examines the role the design, structure, and management of such programs can play in facilitating positive outcomes.

The purpose of the current study is to examine one sport-based service learning program to determine how positive social capital outcomes may have been produced for its college student leaders. In addition, the study examines how this program has been structured to provide such outcomes. The research questions are as follows:

1. In what way has the service learning experience impacted social capital development of its college student leaders?
2. How have the structures in place through the service learning environment (classroom and service site(s)) facilitated that development?

The context for this study is City Sport, a SFD program operated by School of Education faculty and staff at a large, Northeastern university in the U.S. with a nearby urban center. College student leaders engage in the program as part of a service learning course.

## 2. City Sport

City Sport is a sport-based service learning program that integrates SFD community service opportunities with a class-based training, education, and reflection component. City Sport's mission focuses on using sport as a hook (Perkins & Noam, 2007) to promote healthy nutrition, life skills education, and academic enrichment. Founded in 2003 and grounded in the principles of sport-based youth development (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem, & Ferber, 2002), City Sport is geared toward positively engaging college students, faculty, and staff with members of a nearby urban community, Hartland. Housed within the university's School of Education, City Sport utilizes deliberate and intentional sport programming in order to facilitate positive relationships with community members (e.g., youth and adults). To this end, through community organizations such as schools and recreation centers, City Sport staff and college students engage with Hartland community youth and families every day of the week. With its more than 100 college student leaders committing upwards of 20,000 h of engagement in the Hartland community each year, City Sport has become a constant presence in the Hartland community and in the lives of its residents.

At its inception, City Sport operated solely as an after school program for pre-adolescent girls (ages 8–12) at a Hartland recreation center. Due to the success of this after school program, City Sport and Hartland community leaders collaborated to expand program offerings to include an after school program for boys, a college preparatory program for teens, a weekend

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