

THE CONTRIBUTION OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS TO THE SOCIAL CAPITAL OF A UNIVERSITY

François Gravelle, University of Ottawa

Léon Larocque, University of Ottawa

Donald Dawson, University of Ottawa

Introduction

According to Health Canada, new initiatives have been undertaken since the beginning of the 1990s in identifying new health indicators allowing for the conceptualization, operationalization and measurement of personal and community health (van Kemenade, 2003a & 2003b). It is suggested that the immediate social environment (family and friends), social networks, mutual trust, civic involvement, and community involvement are significant but under researched factors contributing to personal and community health. It is also argued that the analytical separation of personal and community health leads to an underestimation of the importance of such factors to health issues and health promotion. Health Canada has already underlined the link of social capital with personal and community health (van Kemenade, 2003a).

Social Capital

According to Smith (2001), the notion of “social capital” first appeared in Hanifan's early work (1916; 1920) on rural school community centers. In his pioneering work, Hanifan (1916:130) referred to social capital as being “those tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people” with respect to “the cultivation of good will, fellowship, sympathy and social intercourse among those that make up a social unit.”

Both Smith (2001) and van Kemenade (2003a) recognize the contribution of Putnam (1993; 1995) in the reemergence of social capital as a focus of community research and policy discussion. Smith (2001) underlines the contributions from Jacobs (1961) in pointing to the importance of “neighbourliness” in the conduct of urban life; from Bourdieu (1983) with regard to relevant social theory; and, from Coleman (1988) with respect to his discussion of the social context of education. The World Bank (1999) cites recent global evidence to support their position that “social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable.” Others (Cohen & Prusak cited in Smith, 2001) underscore the importance of social capital as a focus for organizational maintenance and social development. All these authors, at least indirectly, suggest that social capital, regardless of its precise definition, contributes to “healthy” communities and social systems.

Defining social capital

Smith (2001) suggests that “social capital refers to connections among individuals’ social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” In essence he is suggesting that “social capital” is embedded in the networks of reciprocal social relations between individuals. The World Bank (1999) holds that social capital is the glue that holds institutions and their members together. Thus, social capital does not exist *sui generis* in institutions, communities or societies, but is manifest in the social relations of individuals. Individual people both contribute to social capital

(i.e., it is “lived”) and benefit from it (i.e., it is embedded in social relationships). At the same time, the collectivity is seen to be characterized by a certain amount of social capital that arises out of its multiplicity of individual and institutional social networks.

Indeed, the social capital of any community is not merely the sum of the social capital of its individual members, but rather, every individual, through the processes of regular social intercourse, is enriched by the collective social capital they create. Smith (2001) argues that the building of healthy communities is largely influenced by the quality of interpersonal interactions and individual and collective commitment towards one another. These interactions and commitments, in their concrete expression within social networking, foster relationships of trust and tolerance that lead to a sense of belonging. These conditions are clearly beneficial for both the collectivity and the individuals that make it up.

Members of communities with a good “stock” of social capital are collectively more likely to be more cohesive, benefit from lower crime figures, enjoy better health, have higher educational achievement, and experience greater economic growth (Smith, 2001).

The Purpose of the Present Study

A university campus can be a closely-knit community with its own institutions and its own formal and informal social networks. Consequently, members of that community, including students, professors, administrative and support staff, all enjoy the opportunity of developing social identities predicated upon their engagement with others in carrying out campus life. A high level of a positive social capital on the campus of a university would contribute greatly to the general health of the community. More specifically, the quality of its members’ interpersonal interactions, their commitment towards one another, their sense of belonging, and their concrete experience of social networking involving relationships of trust and tolerance would be enhanced. In this sense, social capital can enhance the prospects for a “healthy” university community, which in turn enhances the social, mental, and ultimately the physical health of all its members.

Communities are built of various subcultures and communities of practice that interact with one another in such a way as to create an articulated social entity. Among the different communities of practice on university campuses are intercollegiate sports programs. One particular such program is the Gee Gee’s intercollegiate sports teams at the University of Ottawa. This program, in existence since the earliest days of the institution, has traditionally been called upon to play an important role in contributing to the development of a sense of belonging among students through the concrete opportunities it provides for social networking.

The purpose of the present research is, then, to study the impact of the Gee Gee’s intercollegiate sports program, in particular its athletes, to the social capital of the University of Ottawa. The contribution of Gee Gee’s athletes to the university’s social capital will then be compared to the contribution of non-athletes from the general student body.

Methodology

A questionnaire measuring social capital was distributed to University of Ottawa undergraduate students in selected classes. The indicators used on the measurement instrument are based on the “Proposed Indicators for Measuring Social Capital” as put forward by Health Canada in its Health Policy Research Working Paper Series (van Kemenade, 2003b), and were adapted to suit the target population of University of Ottawa students. Eight classes, one French and one English from first, second, third and fourth years were used to survey the non-athletes. This convenience sample was made up of larger service courses offered by the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. These courses serve a diverse collection of students from a variety of programs across the campus. A total of 292 students completed questionnaires out of the over 29,000 undergraduates registered at the University. This group closely resembled the entire student population with respect to sex, age, language, year of study, and faculty. A sample of this size, were it randomly drawn, would be accurate within plus or minus six percentage points nineteen times out of twenty. The responses of two groups – those identifying themselves as intercollegiate athletes and non-athletes – were then analyzed to demonstrate the contribution of Gee Gee’s athletes to the University of Ottawa’s stock of social capital relative to the contribution of comparable non-athlete students.

Results

Table 1
T-Tests Comparing the Contribution of Interuniversity Athletes (n=36) to University Social Capital with Non-Athlete Students (n=256)

Dimension	Status	Mean	Std. Dev.	t Value	Probability
Memberships ¹	athlete	2.17	1.86	4.569	0.000
	non-athlete	0.71	1.16		
Volunteering ²	athlete	1.03	1.28	2.398	0.021
	non-athlete	0.50	0.88		
Political Participation ³	athlete	1.19	1.37	0.360	0.721
	non-athlete	1.11	1.24		
Time on Campus ⁴	athlete	1.55	0.54	5.945	0.000
	non-athlete	0.97	0.57		
Trust of People ⁵	athlete	0.83	1.25	0.687	0.496
	non-athlete	0.68	1.29		
Trust of Services ⁶	athlete	0.82	0.57	0.334	0.740
	non-athlete	0.78	0.61		
Sense of Belonging ⁷	athlete	2.72	0.70	2.389	0.021
	non-athlete	2.42	0.76		

1. Number of memberships in university clubs, associations or organizations.

(minimum = 0 & maximum = 10)

2. Number of times volunteering for any university group over the last 12 months.

(minimum = 0 & maximum = 5)

3. Number of times participating in student politics or university political issues.

(minimum = 0 & maximum = 6)

4. Frequency, on average, of time spent on campus outside classes – six item scale.

(0 = “never”; 1 = “a few times a year”; 2 = “once or twice a month”; 3 = “each week”)

5. Total level of trust of people at the university – two item scale.

(1 = “trust”; 0 = “not sure”; -1 = “don’t trust”) (minimum = -2 & maximum = 2).

6. Mean level trust of services at the university – 17 item scale.

(-2 = “not at all trustful”; -1 = “not very trustful”; 1 = “fairly trustful”; 2 = “very trustful”)

7. Sense of belonging to the university community – single item.

(1 = “very weak”; 2 = “rather weak”; 3 = “rather strong”; 3 = “very strong”)

Discussion and Practical Applications

It appears from the initial analyses that members of Gee Gee’s sports teams at the University of Ottawa contribute substantially to the university’s social capital in a variety of ways. Their direct participation with their respective teams is but one facet of the impact of intercollegiate athletics on the social capital of a university. Enhancing the social capital at a university can contribute to the health not only of the institution itself but of its students as well.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1983) Forms of capital. In J. C. Richards (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, New York: Greenwood Press.
- Coleman, J. C. (1988) Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology* 94: S95-S120.
- Hanifan, L. J. (1916) The rural school community center. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 67: 130-138.
- Hanifan, L. J. (1920) *The Community Center*, Boston: Silver Burdett.
- Jacobs, J. (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random
- Putnam, R. D. (1993) *Making Democracy Work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Putnam, R. D. (1995) Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy* 6:1, January, 65-78.
- Smith, M. K. (2001) Social capital. In *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm.
- van Kemenade S. (2003a) Social capital as a health determinant: How is it defined? Health Canada, Catalogue No. H13-5/02-7E.
- van Kemenade S. (2003b) Social capital as a health determinant: How is it measured? Health Canada, Catalogue No. H13-5/02-8E.
- World Bank (1999) What is Social Capital? *PovertyNet* <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/whatsc.htm>

ABSTRACTS
of Papers Presented at the
Eleventh Canadian Congress on Leisure Research
May 17 – 20, 2005
Hosted by
Department of Recreation and Tourism Management
Malaspina University-College
Nanaimo, B.C.
Abstracts compiled and edited by
Tom Delamere, Carleigh Randall, David Robinson
CCLR-11 Programme Committee
Tom Delamere
Dan McDonald
Carleigh Randall
Rick Rollins
and
David Robinson



Copyright © 2005 Canadian Association for Leisure Studies
ISBN 1-896886-01-9



Appropriate Use of Documents: Documents may be downloaded or printed (single copy only). Please note that this document is copyrighted and CREDIT MUST BE PROVIDED to the originator of the document when you quote from it. You must not sell the document or make a profit from reproducing it. You must not copy, extract, summarize or distribute downloaded documents outside of your own organization in a manner which competes with or substitutes for the distribution of the database by the Lifestyle Information Network (LIN). <http://www.lin.ca>