Understanding and Improving Capacity in Diverse Community Contexts and Organizations

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Preface

This resource was developed through a workshop at the Gathering Strength Framework for Recreation in Canada Forum 2018, held in Regina, SK on May 8-10, 2018. The forum was based around the priorities of The Framework for Recreation in Canada: Pathways to Wellbeing. Specifically, this workshop was closely related to Goal Five: Recreation Capacity. This resource includes both the information and the stories that were shared and discussed in the session titled Understanding and Improving Capacity within Diverse Community Contexts and Organization. It is our hope that sharing this information and these stories can function as a resource for those thinking about capacity and working to enhance or develop capacity in their communities.

We would like to thank the many participants of the workshop for their stories, questions, and insightful reflections. Your willingness to share and engage in these conversations is greatly appreciated. Also thank you to the Saskatchewan Parks and Recreation Association for hosting the forum and allowing us to engage with a diverse group of movers and shakers in community recreation. Thanks Rob for the stellar introduction.

Introduction

Capacity is a somewhat elusive term. In discussing capacity in the context of recreation, we are often drawn immediately to identify the money and infrastructure that we either do or do not possess in our communities. Yet, we also quickly acknowledge that there are more abstract, social, or emotional resources in our communities both within and outside of recreation. Therefore, in order to enhance or build capacity in communities and community organizations, we first need to understand the scope of capacity and its implications in and for communities.

Building on these discussions, the objectives of this resource are:
- To provide a brief explanation of community capacity and define its various dimensions.
- To provide examples, in the form of case studies, of how these dimensions are implicated in community recreation.
- To identify other resources that may be helpful in understanding and improving community capacity in the context of recreation

Understanding Capacity

Capacity can broadly be understood as the way that communities "get things done." What gets done can be anything from designing and implementing a new program, to identifying and solving problems, acquiring and mobilizing resources, or strategic planning for the future. Importantly, capacity does not have to be understood as a static resource or a thing that you either do, or do not have. Alternatively, we can define capacity as a dynamic and fluid process that people, organizations, and governments are constantly engaged in. A process oriented understanding of capacity is useful because it acknowledges the reality that people, places, and organizations are constantly changing.

We can also think about capacity as what is going well or what is not: just like we can think about a glass as half empty or half full. Rather than identifying what we don't have, there is a strong case for considering what we do have and working with those resources in order to capitalize on them and even leverage them for other outcomes. This approach draws from a process called "Asset-Based Community Development" which prioritizes the asset or resources that exist in a community, rather than pointing out what is missing.

See the list at the end of this document for links to resources on capacity and asset based community development.

Dimensions of Capacity

Since capacity is such a complex term with many implications, it is helpful to break it down into several dimensions. It is also important to acknowledge that these dimensions will very rarely be discrete categories that don't overlap and intertwine in different ways. Identifying different dimensions allows us to think about different ways that we can enhance or build capacity in diverse contexts.

Below, we break down six dimensions of capacity and provide a few questions that can prompt some critical reflections about what that dimension might look like in your community or organization.
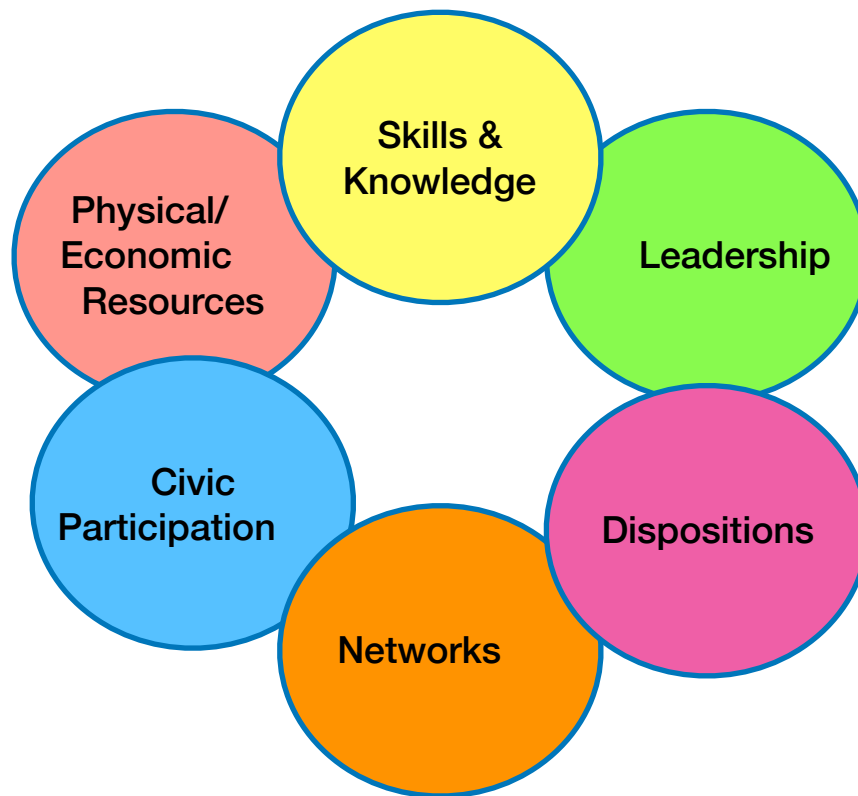

Figure 1.
Six dimensions of community capacity (adapted from Matarrita-Cascante & Edwards, 2016)

Physical & Economic Resources
Resources are often the foundation of community projects and programs. These include the obvious things like money to fund staff and buildings to host programs in, but they also involve other things like equipment for activities, technology to access/store information, and even natural resources like beaches, forests, or a beautiful view of the sunset.

Physical/ Economic Resources
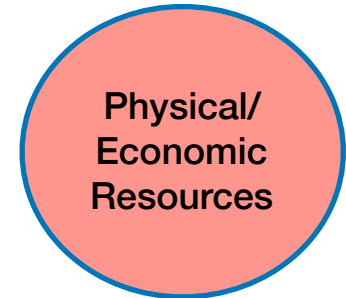
Questions:
- What physical and natural resources exist in your community?
- How accessible or useful are these resources?
- What are the most important or valued resources in your community?

Skills & Knowledge
Once we know what resources we have, skills and knowledge help us know how to access it and what to do with it. These can be hard or tangible like knowing how to format a spreadsheet to track registration and payment, how to maintain a trail system through a local park, or how to create a master plan for the future; but they can also be softer skills like how to recruit volunteers or motivate people to participate. Importantly, skills and knowledge aren't always acquired formally (through education or certification). They can also be a result of local knowledge and understanding that only exist within your community.

Skills & Knowledge

Questions:
- What do people do really well in your community?
- How do successful events/programs happen in your community?
- What do people enjoy or pride themselves on?

Leadership
Although various skills and knowledge exist in a community, they may not always be mobilized or used effectively. Leadership includes the ways that different individuals or groups use their power as citizens to access, mobilize, or organize the skills, resources, and knowledge within a given community.

Leadership can be formal (e.g., the president of a community association) but it can also be informal (e.g., when a group of people notice an issue in their community and come together informally to address).

Questions:
- Who are the formal and informal leaders in your community?
- Why are these people leaders?
- How do leaders access or control resources, skills, and knowledge?
- How or why are leaders supported by others in your community?

Civic Participation
In order for leaders to do their work, they need to be supported by people in the community. Civic participation can be described as how involved community members are as well as how committed and/or passionate they are. Without citizen participation and buy in, leadership cannot be effective. Civic participation also allows for diverse perspectives to be presented, and can improve a sense of ownership in community recreation, as well as promote sustainability of programs and projects.

Questions:
- Who is involved in projects and programs in your community?
- Are diverse groups of people from your community adequately represented in leadership and or participation in recreation?
- Are there instances where groups of people have mobilized to support or oppose activities or initiatives?

Networks
Without connections between people, communities don't work. Networks acknowledge the webs of relationships between people and organizations. These can be formal networks (e.g., a partnership to deliver a program or service) as well as informal (e.g., a group of friends who plays pick-up in the park). Networks allow information and
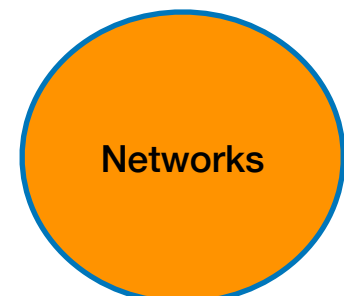
resources to be shared, for support structures to function, and for communication to exist within communities. Importantly, networks constitute a powerful mechanism of inclusion and exclusion because they necessarily identify people or organizations who are part of the network, as well as those who aren't.

Questions:
- Who belongs to powerful networks in your community?
- What formal networks exist and how do they share information, resources, and/or support?
- What is the role of informal networks in recreation?
- How can you leverage both formal and informal networks in order to improve or enhance recreation?

Dispositions
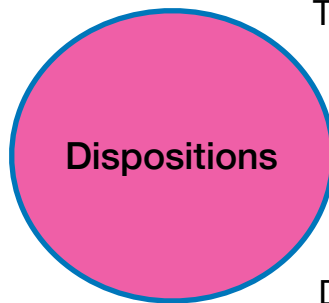
There are also emotional and psychological aspects of community capacity. In short, how people perceive and feel about programs, activities, or initiatives within their communities. These dispositions can be positive or negative, and different groups in communities can have very different dispositions towards initiatives, organizations, and the community as a whole.

Dispositions are what informs citizens' ideas of togetherness, trust, reciprocity, and a sense of community, but can also inform ideas of exclusion or isolation.

Questions:
- What do people say about your community when describing it to friends?
- How are diverse groups or organizations perceived within your community?
- Are there groups within the community who do not feel welcomed or included in community recreation or decision making?
- Do you have a means of accessing and connecting with those you are not already in touch with?

Importantly, we need to acknowledge that the dimensions described above should be understood as broad categories to consider, which overlap and intertwine in various ways. Very rarely would a discussion of capacity be about only one of these discrete categories. Issues in communities and the strategies undertaken will likely involve several of these categories and the ways in which they interact and influence each other.

Articulating your Community Context

Importantly, processes of capacity will not look the same in every community. As recreation professionals, we know that diverse community contexts involve many different (physical, political, and social) layers that need to be navigated in order to get things done. We also know that "cookie cutter" programs and resources are rarely effective for everyone. An important part of understanding this process is being able to make the links between the context of the community and the capacity processes taking place within it.

It may be helpful here to think about communities as complex entities. Rather than equating "community" with a geographic region (e.g., a town or neighbourhood), consider communities to be complex webs of relationships between people, places, resources, and organizations. These relationships can be both positive and negative, and are constantly changing as people learn, grow, move, and meet new people. Defining community this way is helpful if we are going to understand capacity as a process that in continuously evolving.

When we are thinking about our community contexts and the many factors that might influence capacity (and our attempts to enhance it), there are many things to consider. These factors can be related to physical and measurable things like populations or distances, as well as social or immeasurable things like relationships or attitudes. Below is a list of things to consider that might influence capacity in diverse community contexts.

Populations - size, density, backgrounds, relationships.
Geography - distances to other towns/cities, natural resources, accessibility of other programs/resources.
Demographics - age, gender compositions, socio-economic situation, cultural/ethnic backgrounds, homo/heterogeneity.
Politics - inter/intra community relationships, economic influences, levels of leadership, political influences, power brokers.
Social Dynamics - tolerance, familiarity, family histories, conflicts, growth/change mindset.

Case Studies in Community Capacity

In this section we will review some the stories about community capacity in various community contexts. These examples range from current undertakings to past events and ongoing processes, and therefore are at various stages of "completeness." The hope here is that in reading and reflecting on stories about other communities, we might better understand how diverse community contexts will produce different experiences of capacity and capacity building or enhancement. Additionally, understanding what is being done in other communities is helpful in stimulating creative thinking about programs and initiatives in our own communities. Wherever possible, links to resources, programs, or the initiatives involved are included following the story.

Centralizing Facilities into a Community-Hub

250 Clark is the community hub in the Municipality of Powassan, Ontario. The hub is located in a former school and was renovated to accommodate municipal offices, a new fire hall, meeting rooms, community spaces, as well as maintaining the gymnasium at fitness centre. The facility was purchased partially in order to centralize services and activities while reducing the number of municipal buildings which required upkeep, in the context of post-amalgamation (of three former municipalities) and political tensions surround representation in policy making and governance of recreation.

Context:
Following the amalgamation of Powassan, Trout Creek, and South Himsworth, the municipality owned many facilities which were dated and in many respects, underused.

Dimensions:
The primary issue was related to physical and economic resources. However, this also involved knowledge and skills of community groups (reflected in their abilities to manage pricing, memberships, and scheduling), the leadership within the municipal council, and the dispositions of community members regarding

existing buildings (to which many were very committed) and the existing leadership (who some felt did not effectively represent their constituents).

Strategies:
In 2016, the municipal council purchased a former school building in order to centralize their services into a community hub: 250 Clark.

Outcomes:
The centralization of these services allowed for an improvement in the programs and activities offered through the municipality and a subsequent increase in user-ship. The process also allowed the municipality to close (and sell) the former municipal office/fire hall as well as a seniors centre (as both were moved into the new facility. Importantly, the new community hub (and all of the activities taking place) has improved the disposition of community members by offering new and diverse opportunities to engage with municipal recreation service.

Links:

http://www.250clark.ca

http://www.powassan.net

District Recreation Directors and the Manitoba Recreation Opportunity Program

The Government of Manitoba Recreation Opportunity Program encourages municipalities to partner and collectively hire recreation directors for a larger area or district.

Context:
Many rural or isolated communities do not have the resources to hire full time staff. These consistent funding opportunities allow for groups of (at least 3) municipalities to access the skills and knowledge to enhance recreation within their district.

Dimensions:

This approach primarily uses networks to enhance capacity within these communities. These networks then enable access to economic resources, skills and knowledge, as well as dispositions and allowing for civic participation.

Strategies:
Communities are able to identify their common goals and pursue funding together. The funding has been ongoing so that these networks can rely on some support to maintain these networks/positions. Networks are typically overseen by boards of directors (including municipal councillors and/or citizens) who work together to ensure equitable distribution of services. This process involves communication and trust building between these municipalities and a reinforcement of these networks and dispositions.

Outcomes:
The program allows for an increase in recreation participation opportunities in rural areas as well as an increase in social networks among citizens. The networks created allow for collaboration and sharing of resources. In some cases, other initiatives (e.g., the creation of a seniors centre) have emerged from the networks created through these programs.

Links:

http://www.gov.mb.ca/mr/bldgcomm/recreg/fryic.html

Navigating Leadership in the Context of a Military Base

Military bases provide a unique context for recreation delivery and participation given their political context and flows of temporary and permanent residents. Further, bases with smaller populations face other unique challenges without the same resources or residents as larger bases.

Context:
Military chain of command adds an additional dimension of leadership which must be navigated for recreation programmers and managers. These layers

often result in a duplication of services and programming is complicated by constantly changing demographics and individuals and families move on-and-off base.

Dimensions:
These issues are largely implicated in leadership structures which direct knowledge, skills, resources, and reporting structures on base. They also impact the dispositions of employees, users, and other community members.

Strategies:
There is an ongoing need to improve communications and understandings between employees and senior leadership. Responding to changing demographics involves an ongoing process of bottom-up programming and the development of partnerships and relationships with community members (both on and off base).

Potential Outcomes:
Through these conversations, there was discussion about the need to develop networks between bases of similar sizes to solve issues and develop resources which can be useful in similar contexts. Additionally, developing community partnerships (in particular with Personnel Support Programs, Military Family Resource Centres, and Veterans Affairs) may allow for the sharing of resources and improving of services and the ability to respond to the needs of residents and citizen more broadly.

Links:

https://www.cafconnection.ca/North-Bay/Home.aspx

https://www.cafconnection.ca/Moose-Jaw/Home.aspx

Multi-Community Recreation Facility

Context:
In a community with aging recreation infrastructure (e.g., an arena needing significant upgrades, the closure of a local pool, etc.) several municipalities came

together to pursue the construction of a multi-use/multi-community recreation facility.

Dimensions:
The initiative involved a strong network of community representatives as well as a partnership with a local university. The process was also facilitated by civic participation and buy-in by many citizens.

Strategies:
The facility is governed and managed independently from the municipalities. The process involved consultation with many stakeholders and is officially governed by an advisory board. In particular, this governance structure engaged local stakeholders in the seniors (who play a key role in the dispositions of residents towards initiatives) as well as the local university who was able to offer a location for the facility.

Outcomes:
This initiative was one of the first official partnerships between the university and the city, and also provided a network through which to strengthen relationships between urban and rural municipalities. Additionally, the partnership and buy-in on the facility allowed for it to operate at an 80% cost recovery for a least one year.

Staffing a Community After-School Program

The town of Bridgewater (NS) experienced challenges in staffing their after school program. The program required a unique and diverse skills set in a permanent and part-time capacity.

Context:
The municipality received funding to support a one year contract for someone in a leadership role, with the intention of developing into a more permanent position. The role required this leader to make connections with the local school as well as community members in order to engage residents and promote a positive perception of the program to encourage junior high school students to participate.

Dimensions:
The main concern in this case, was finding someone with the leadership skills to occupy several roles within this one position. These leadership skills also involved the creation of networks, engagement of citizens (i.e., civic participation), as well as creating a positive disposition among these citizens.

Strategies:
With the goal of having someone in this role longterm, someone was sought out who had the skills, knowledge, and leadership potential to fill this need. In this case, leadership was considered specifically as the ability to organize resources, network with the appropriate stakeholders, as well as create a positive disposition among junior high school students towards the program (and the leader).

Outcomes:
An individual was located and hired to fill the role. The role involves a large amount of mentorship for local youth in order to improve their dispositions towards the community and contribute to the ongoing development of leadership among others. The process ultimately led to training some of these youth in leadership skills which will hopefully create positive outcomes for other community groups and initiatives.

Links:

https://bridgewater.ca/town-services/parks-recreation-a-culture/department-overview-staff

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Hosting Multiple Large Events

As part of community development efforts, a municipality of 17,000 residents sought out the role of hosting several large events. While events are typically undertaken with the intention of bringing people to communities (with their tourism dollars), they can also be important vehicles for developing outcomes within host communities.

Context:
The municipality had not hosted events for several years, however had a strong base of volunteers who were well positioned to coordinate and contribute to event hosting processes. With few prospects for sponsorship available, these volunteer capabilities were relied on throughout the hosting process.

Dimensions:
The strong volunteer base possessed many skills and a lot of knowledge. As a result leadership (e.g., municipal staff/council) had a lot of support. Further, given that many volunteers were available and ready to engage, civic participation was high, initiatives were well supported, and new networks were able to be connected within the municipality.

Strategies:
Through the hosting processes, volunteers were sought out and engaged for a variety of different opportunities. This allowed volunteers to try out new roles, improve their skills and experiences, and improve knowledge transfer within municipal networks. Hosting events also provided the opportunity to recruit new volunteers as well as train (new and existing) volunteers to develop new skills and knowledge. The process also involved acknowledging the value of these volunteers and communicating this appreciation to them.

Outcomes:
Overall, the hosting process allowed the municipality to connect with and engage a wide range of residents - improving civic participation. It also was understood to create an awareness and appreciation of the strong base of volunteers and what they can accomplish, without necessarily relying on handouts, donations, or corporate sponsorship.

Facilities Audit

A municipality with a low population density is in the process of conducting a facilities audit within many municipal wards. These involve a variety of facilities (e.g., community halls, baseball diamonds, playgrounds, tennis courts, outdoor rinks, equestrian spaces, etc.) spread out among the wards.

Context:
The municipality has ~13,000 residents spread out over ~6,000km². There are 15 local halls spread throughout the municipality, with at least one in each ward (which is represented by a municipal councillor). As such, the halls are part of the political landscape of the municipality and are viewed as important spaces in the community. Unfortunately, the audit is required to ensure that spaces are being used effectively and that the municipality is being fiscally responsible.

Dimensions:
The primary concern here is having the skills and knowledge to undertake the audit in a way that is effective, yet also considers the political dimension of the task. Importantly, the audit needs to go beyond the "dollars and cents" to consider the civic participation and dispositions on residents in these wards.

Strategies:
The audit will include several public engagement strategies including open houses, information sessions, and recreation needs assessment in the wards. Importantly, the process with be as transparent as possible and attempt effectively communicate budgetary considerations to residents. The process is being informed by a "recreation for all" framework endorsed by municipal council.

Outcomes:
The process will attempt to create a "big picture" of recreation in each ward by assessing available resources, needs, and opportunities. The intention is to improve efficiency of recreation programming and increase public knowledge of opportunities as well as the budget required to sustain these opportunities. Ideally, the process will result in the smooth amalgamation of some halls to reduce the number of facilities while maintaining accessibility of opportunities.

Resources

Sustaining Community Blog

- Graeme Stuart, Newcastle University

The Sustaining Community Blog contains a wealth of really insightful posts about all things related to community development and citizen engagement. Stuart does a nice job of explaining how theoretical ideas connect with real world practice and also provides a ton of links to relevant information and academic sources to back up his arguments and link them to other conversations.

In particular, the following two post might be of interest:

Community Capacity Building:

https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2014/03/10/ccb/

Asset-Based Community Development:

https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/what-is-abcd/

Community Engagement:

https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2012/05/24/vertical-and-horizontal-community-engagement/

Measuring Community Capacity Building

- Aspen Institute (2009)

This handbook provides a great overview of community capacity and how you can consider measurement. It is particularly useful as it focuses on rural communities. The book is organized around eight "outcomes" of community capacity, but relates really clearly to many of the dimensions discussed here.

https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/measuring-community-capacity-building/

Building Community Capacity: A Manual for U.S. Air Force Family Support Centres

- Gary Bowen, Dennis Orthner, James Martin, & Jay Mancini (2001)

This publication is an in depth training manual designed to train those working in family support functions in the context of military communities. The manual is quite lengthly, but provides lots of information and thought provoking ideas about navigating community, leadership, and family in a military setting.

http://jssmobile.org/Files/building-community-capacity-report.pdf

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Identifying and Defining the Dimensions of Community Capacity to Provide a Basis for Measurement *(1998)*

- Robert Goodman, Marjorie Speers, Kenneth McLerow, Stephen Fawcett, Michelle Kegler, Edith Partker, Steven Smith, Terri Sterling, and Nina Wallerstein

This research paper summarizes the dimensions of community capacity identified through a public consultation process. As this work was conducted in the context of health, the dimensions differ somewhat in their description and application from those described in this resource, however this writing provides a more thorough description and exploration of various dimensions of community capacity.

https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/67070/10.1177_109019819802500303.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

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The following tables were circulated during the workshop. They are from the book chapter listed below. This book is titled *Community Development: Applications for Leisure, Sport, and Tourism*, edited by Canadian recreation and leisure scholars, and is a fantastic introduction into the topic.

Reference:
Matarrita-Cascante, D. & Edwards, M. (2016). Community capacity. In (Eds.) E. Sharpe, H. Mair, & F. Yuen, Community Development: Applications for Leisure, Sport, and Tourism (p. 17). State College, PA: Venture.

TABLE 2.1 DIMENSIONS OF COMMUNITY CAPACITY (ORGANIZED BY THE AUTHORS)

Dimension	Description	Desired Condition
Physical and Economic Assets	Financial and physical capitals available in the community necessary to establish and support projects	Numerous and diverse assets
Skills and Knowledge	Aptitudes or know-how possessed by community members and organizations necessary to put into action desired goals and visions	Diverse skills and knowledge casting a wide range of community-relevant aspects
Leadership	Individuals or organizations in the community that lead the way in working to solve community problems	Numerous, dedicated, and strong leaders
Civic Participation	Involvement of residents and organizations in the decision making, establishment, and management of projects and activities	Large and diverse participation from different sectors of the community
Networks	Web of relationships from which community members share resources, information, and communicate to solve local problems	Well-established and wide-ranging networks
Disposition	Attitudes that community members and organizations have regarding working as one to solve local problems	Positive and constant disposition

TABLE 2.2 EXAMPLES OF LEISURE'S ROLE IN CAPACITY BUILDING

Dimension	Example of Leisure as a Context for Building Capacity
Physical and Economic Assets	Leisure as a context for building physical and economic assets through: Facilitating economic development and providing recreation facilities (e.g., parks, community centers) for meeting space
Skills and Knowledge	Leisure as a context for building skills and knowledge through: Providing education programs (e.g., accounting, public speaking) through recreation programs and skills developed through volunteer experiences and training
Leadership	Leisure as a context for building leadership through: Leadership development of volunteers, providing opportunities for career volunteering, and the credibility of leisure-service professionals (e.g., coaches, pastors) as trusted community leaders
Civic Participation	Leisure as a context for building civic participation through: Ensuring residents have access to leisure to participate in community activities, involvement in staging community events creating a heightened sense of citizenship among volunteers and participants, and encouraging shared decision making within community programs and events
Networks	Leisure as a context for building networks through: Providing leisure programs and spaces to encourage interpersonal social interaction and developing inter-organizational community partnerships to plan and implement leisure programs and events
Disposition	Leisure as a context for building disposition through: Facilitating shared experiences where collective identity and community capital can develop among participants and volunteers