Institutional Barriers Impeding Collegiate Sport Club Operational Effectiveness

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Collegiate sport clubs constitute an important sport outlet for college students, with club operations managed by member students serving in governing roles. While clubs are given autonomy to operate, they must navigate a complex institutional environment with regulative pressures that can impede club operations. This research explored the institutional barriers that impede collegiate sport clubs from operating effectively. Guided by a bioecological framework and social constructivist epistemology, we facilitated focus groups with 29 collegiate sport clubs, interviewed four recreational sport administrators, and collected 29 public documents pertaining to club operations across three universities in the United States. Thematic analysis across the data sources revealed three overarching themes, pointing to institutional rules, policies, and procedures (e.g., regulations on club eligibility, executive boards, resource allocations, financial activities, risk, travel, marketing); university constraints (e.g., limited university resources, organizational problems, interorganizational conflict); and club constraints (e.g., poor communication, poor planning and documentation, poor decisions, centralized leadership) as factors impeding club operations. Study implications include reducing bureaucratic red tape, training club leaders, creating a sport club council, supporting club resource acquisition, and increasing club's division of labor and communication.

Keywords: collegiate recreation; sport clubs; bioecological model; university bureaucracy; constraints

Higher education institutions across the United States (U.S.) saw the emergence of sport as part of the campus experience during the mid to late 1800s (Lewis, 1970). Initially, athletic competitions were set up by students for students and provided an outlet for those who wanted to engage in extra-curricular activities (Crowley, 2006; Smith, 2011). As time passed, these competitions evolved and faculty and university presidents soon took control, forming the Intercollegiate Athletic Association of the U.S. in 1906, which was later renamed the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) in 1910 (Smith, 2011).

The goal of the NCAA was to establish a national governing body that could regulate intercollegiate athletics and ensure college sport was in line with "the dignity and high purpose of education" (Intercollegiate Athletic Ass'n of the United States, CONST. art. II as cited in Carter, 2005, p. 221). Despite this shift, students continued organizing their own athletic teams and sporting events, establishing a second form of college sport labeled collegiate sport clubs (CSCs). These sport teams/organizations stood in stark contrast to the intercollegiate athletic programs the NCAA sought to govern. Unlike intercollegiate athletics, which lent universities a vehicle to attract positive attention and revenue (Smith, 2011), CSCs focused on serving the student population's desire for athletic competition. That is, CSCs worked to unify students who had a mutual interest in specific sports (Czekanski & Lower, 2019) and provide those students with sport and social activities (Haines & Fortman, 2008; Lower et al., 2020) that might teach lifelong skills in "leadership, teamwork, dedication, and respect" (About NIRSA, 2018, para. 2).

As CSCs continued to evolve to fulfill this unique role within the U.S. higher education system, a distinctive sport model formed that currently guides clubs (see Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Springer, 2021). At the center of the CSC model is the club itself, which elects members (aka officers) to serve in leadership roles on the executive board and manage club operations (Lower et al., 2021). The executive board further establishes the club's culture and sets goals it works to achieve (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). External to the club and its student executive board are numerous ancillary actors, such as the recreational sport department and associated sport governing bodies (SGBs), who provide various inputs like resources, guidelines, and policies that affect club operations (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). These interactions within and outside the club are essential to the CSC model.

For example, a club's executive board members interact internally, holding regular meetings to manage the logistics of club operations (Czekanski et al., 2023). This includes setting up and running team meetings, tryouts, practices, social events, and more (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). Externally, a club's executive board interacts with employees at their institution, teams from other universities, national governing bodies, vendors, officials, and alumni (Czekanski et al., 2023). As each club uniquely manages these interactions and relationships, individual cultures form across CSCs and change as athletes matriculate into and out of clubs.

Chief among the relationships that affect CSCs' culture and operations is that between clubs and the university (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). CSCs are generally housed within the university recreational sport department -

which oversees recreational sport facilities, programs, and services—with an associate director and/or coordinator responsible for supervising the sport club program (Mull et al., 2019). Research has shown recreational sport club programs have significant interactions with the CSCs they oversee as they help train club officers in matters needed to manage and run a club (e.g., risk management, proper completion of university forms, First Aid/CPR), provide structure and guidance on operations (e.g., university rules, web support, booking travel), and help manage money (e.g., provide bank accounts, help with fundraising activities, approve budget) amongst other things (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Springer et al., 2024).

While the interplay between an organization and external actors may bring positive outcomes, it might also create numerous obstacles. More specifically, Filo et al. (2015) noted in their discussion of community sport clubs in Australia how a power imbalance may form between a sport club and external governing organizations. This power imbalance can result in sport clubs facing various obstacles that might impact their ability to operate effectively. In examining CSCs specifically, Lower-Hoppe et al. (2021) remarked that since universities largely control sport club facilities, equipment, and money and set the general rules/structure for operations, clubs perceive the university as the biggest obstacle they face. However, the barriers brought by the relationship between CSCs and their university have yet to be examined, making it challenging to fully understand CSCs, their relationship with the university, and how the interplay potentially hinders a club's success.

As such, the primary purpose of this paper was to explore perceived institutional barriers impeding CSCs from operating effectively. To accomplish this goal, we first placed the current research purpose within Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological model, which suggests that development, growth, and maturation depend on interactions with external environments. This is followed by a brief discussion of the model and an in-depth analysis of how CSCs fit within its framework. We developed a semi-structured focus group protocol and conducted a series of focus groups comprised of CSC student officers. After completing the focus groups, we interviewed university administrators overseeing CSCs and collected publicly available documents (e.g., student organization handbooks, student code of conduct) to help provide additional context to the study. We analyzed and compared each qualitative dataset to answer the study's primary research question:

RQ: What institutional barriers impede CSCs' operational effectiveness?

Theoretical Framework

Neo-institutional theorists posit that organizations exist within organizational fields and their growth and maturation depend on internal organizational operations and interactions with the external environment (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1991). Further, organizations, like individuals, undergo developmental life stages (Piaget, 1952; Sirmon et al., 2011). Thus, it stands to reason that one can apply Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological model to examine organizational development (Berkeley et al., 1995). The model supports a multilevel analysis ac-

counting for internal and external elements shaping organizations' maturation and growth. This allows for a refined understanding of the influences on organizational development without requiring a granular focus on each component.

The bioecological model enables an exploration of how organizations interact with their immediate environment, adapt to external pressures, and evolve over time through the theory's focus on the complex interplay between process, person, context, and time (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Tudge et al., 2016). The process component considers interactions between an organization and its environment—much like proximal processes in human development—which are central to organizational change and adaptation. When adapted to organizations, the person aspect looks at an organization's unique characteristics—its culture, structure, and resources—which drive its engagement with various developmental processes.

The context element is particularly relevant for organizations, as it facilitates a multilevel formulation of an organization's micro-, meso-, and macro-environment, including the immediate operational setting and the broader sector it operates within. This extends the neo-institutional emphasis on environmental interactions to consider how multiple contextual layers impact organizational growth and behavior. Environmental interactions can either support or constrain an organization's operations, affecting its maturation and growth. Finally, the time component acknowledges organizational developments' dynamic nature, recognizing changes and adaptations occur in response to current conditions and as part of a longer historical and developmental trajectory.

In the CSC context, we are particularly concerned with organizational effectiveness as a proximal process promoting club development. CSCs exist in a plurality where various internal and external stakeholders (e.g., university administrators, governing bodies, club members, club officers) influence clubs' abilities to achieve their goals (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020). This positions individual sport clubs at the ecological environment's center or microsystem (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Springer, 2021). In light of previous scholarship that has identified the university as a prominent barrier to sport club operations (Lower et al., 2021), this paper focuses on how the university constrains club operational effectiveness. Pindek et al. (2018) defined organizational constraints as "aspects of the immediate… environment that inhibit the translation of motivation and abilities into effective performance" (p. 79). Research has found 11 prominent organizational constraints, including: organizational rules and procedures, supervisor, poor equipment/supplies, lack of equipment/supplies, inadequate training, other employees, interruptions by other people, lack of necessary information about what to do or how to do it, conflicting demands, inadequate help from others, and incorrect instructions (Pindek & Spector, 2016; Spector & Jex, 1998).

Internal to sport clubs, organizational constraints such as student turnover and conflicting demands likely shape CSCs' organizational dynamics, requiring club officers and members to adapt and innovate, navigating these challenges to maintain or enhance club activities (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Beyond these dynamics, clubs interact extensively with broader external environments. University administrators'

managerial approach to club oversight and influence on institutional policies and procedures governing clubs are key external factors impacting clubs' effectiveness, with restrictive rules and scarce resources considered major organizational constraints (Lower et al., 2021). Broadly, the club program and university represent the meso- and macrosystems, respectively. These larger systems influence clubs' immediate operational environment

To operationalize the bioecological model's temporal element, particular attention was given to time and timing. Data collection occurred pre-pandemic. Thus, time was contextualized as the socio-historical climate in higher education, which at the time was rife with increased resource competition due to reduced state funding and an increased focus on transparency and accountability related to program delivery (Franklin, 2013). Timing, which refers to a specific moment in time, was operationalized as our ability to understand the internal and external elements shaping clubs' organizational effectiveness (i.e., their current state). This insight then improves our understanding of the factors that facilitate or impede clubs' effectiveness and future growth and development. The subsequent review focuses on further defining the multilevel sport club environment.

Collegiate Sport Clubs

CSCs represent one of the oldest forms of intercollegiate sport delivery in American higher education (Springer & Dixon, 2021). Clubs serve various purposes, including social integration (Haines & Format, 2008; Warner et al., 2012), holistic development (Dugan et al., 2015; Flosdorf et al., 2016), and an outlet for physical activity (Warner & Dixon, 2013). They offer a range of competitiveness—encompassing recreational to elite competition—and involvement levels—from casual participation to leadership roles tasked with balancing internal club operations and external governance (Mull et al., 2019).

Clubs

CSCs offer an alternative intercollegiate sport model in American higher education, characterized by student-led executive boards that handle various operational tasks (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020; Warner et al., 2012). While this centralized structure can expedite decision-making by reducing bureaucracy, it requires student officers to have a well-rounded understanding of club functions to address operational gaps effectively (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). It also requires student officers to contend with internal and external organizational constraints, such as team dynamics, regulations, and resource availability. Club officers may simultaneously hold leadership positions in multiple organizations or have competing priorities like work, courses, and family, stretching their ability to fulfill diverse club responsibilities. Additionally, frequent student turnover requires continuous recruitment and training efforts to ensure smooth leadership transitions and sustained club operations (Czekanski & Lower, 2019).

Clubs rely on the support of their universities and associated recreational sport club programs for critical resources and training (Czekanski et al., 2023), reflecting an ecological relationship spanning from the clubs (i.e., micro) to the recreational program (i.e., meso) and the broader university system (i.e., macro). Therefore, clubs' organizational development is considerably affected by their external environment (Basadur et al., 2012). To foster this development, club officers must combine internally generated resources with those obtained from these external entities. Officers must also be flexible and responsive to changes and constraints in the external environment to enhance club efficiency and sustainability—an alignment well-suited to clubs' inherently organic natures (Basadur et al., 2012; Czekanski & Lower, 2019).

Sport Club Program

In recreational sport club programs, specific administrators are tasked with exclusively overseeing sport clubs or managing clubs in conjunction with other aspects of recreational sport (e.g., intramurals; Springer, 2021). This approach creates opportunities for inter-organizational conflict due to factors that include club-to-program and club-to-club interaction, decision-making, and competing personal and organizational incentives and motivations (Lumineaue et al., 2015). Conflict may also arise because of the influence of institutional environments or the use of formal or informal governance mechanisms (Lumineau et al., 2015). Of particular interest are governance mechanisms categorized by Mull et al. (2019) as conservative or liberal, which critically shape sport club management.

In a conservative model, club officers are afforded minimal discretion over operational procedures, with institutions providing financial and infrastructural support through recreational sport club programs. Such support can constrain club leaders, requiring them to obtain approval for their travel schedules; club practices, competitions, and socials; and financial transactions. It may also necessitate appointing a faculty or staff advisor for additional oversight and entail creating and maintaining regulatory documents – such as a club constitution and by-laws - that enforce club compliance with program-level requirements.

In contrast, a liberal model gives club officers greater autonomy to determine club operations. Accordingly, clubs are largely self-financed, shouldering operations and equipment costs. Institutional support is minimal, compelling club members to independently secure resources like facilities, equipment, medical supervision, or insurance. While these models offer a useful framework for understanding sport club oversight, most recreational sport club programs likely implement practices that blend elements from either extreme. This governance spectrum reflects the broader context of the university environment, where bureaucratic structures and resource scarcity present additional layers of complexity and constraint for club operations.

University

Bureaucracy is an intrinsic part of American higher education administration, shaping the external environment where recreational programs and sport clubs operate (Birnbaum, 1988; Manning, 2017; Springer, 2021). Bureaucratic systems are

inherently formal and thus prompt homogeneity of their internal components, those being recreational sport club programs and sport clubs. However, individual sport clubs are typically less formal (Czekanski & Lower, 2019), which may lead to resistance from clubs when navigating university-imposed bureaucratic processes and inter-organizational conflict between clubs and recreational sport club programs. Further, research has demonstrated differential goals across universities, recreational sport club programs, and individual sport clubs, which can contribute to interorganizational conflict. For example, universities depend on sport clubs to promote the university, recruit new students, and provide extracurricular opportunities for students (Czekanski et al., 2023), however sport clubs focus on improving operations, winning contests, and building their social network (Czekanski et al., 2019). The prevailing challenge of resource scarcity in higher education further compounds these issues. It places recreational sport club programs under increased pressure to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness to justify and enhance resource allocation. Consequently, club programs are tasked with evaluating the performance of individual clubs, utilizing various metrics to make informed decisions about resource distribution and program support (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2023). These circumstances reinforce the intricate ecosystem that exists between universities, sport club programs, and CSCs. The subsequent methods section provides insight into the strategies we employed to assess institutional barriers impeding clubs' operational effectiveness and thus affecting their ability to grow and develop within the university ecosystem.

Methods

Research Design

We approached the study from a social constructivist epistemology (Kim, 2010), using qualitative inquiry to explore the institutional barriers impeding CSC operations. The study was built from the perspective that perceived institutional barriers are socially constructed through an individual's interactions and experiences within the institution (Kim, 2010). Accordingly, we sought to interpret the social world of CSCs through the lens of key actors engaged in this setting. Within the context of CSCs, university recreational sport administrators and students serving as officers on the club executive board must navigate the institutional environment to operate sport clubs. Therefore, we explored the interactions, experiences, and perspectives of CSC administrators and officers to understand the influence of the recreational sport club program (meso-system) and university (macro-system) on sport club operations (micro-system).

Participants

To capture a diverse sample, we selected three CSC programs across the U.S. for investigation and obtained administrative and institutional review board approval for the study. The CSC programs were housed within a large, public university in the Midwest ('University A'), a mid-size, public university in the East ('University B'), and a large, private university in the South ('University C'). Employing

purposive sampling, we recruited information-rich cases relevant to our research questions (Patton, 2002). Moreover, all student officers - responsible for managing individual sport clubs—and university administrators—responsible for overseeing the sport club program—at each of the three institutions were invited to participate in the study. A $10 gift card was provided to student participants to incentivize their participation.

Across the three universities, 68 student sport club officers, representing 29 individual sport clubs and fulfilling various leadership roles like president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer participated in the study. The officers represented clubs that ranged in size (15-100 members), gender (women's, men's, co-ed), and competitive classification (competitive, non-competitive). Additionally, four recreational sport administrators, representing department director and CSC program director/coordinator roles, participated in the study. Demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Data Collection

We developed a semi-structured focus group protocol and interview guide to explore institutional barriers within the CSC context (Kallio et al., 2016). Before developing the tools, we evaluated the appropriateness of our methodological approach to address our study's research question. Broadly, using semi-structured questions to solicit participants' interactions, experiences, and perspectives pertaining to CSCs was in line with our social constructivist research design (Creswell, 2013). We strategically employed focus groups for the student officer population given their confined roles, the cooperative nature of club executive boards, and the opportunity for officers to 'piggyback' off each other's ideas during the focus group conversation (Creswell, 2013; Leung & Savithiri, 2009). Comparatively, we elected to conduct interviews with the university administrators as this method is considered suitable for gathering in-depth information about meaningful and relevant issues to participants (Cridland et al., 2015).

We critically appraised the literature examining CSCs' bioecological environment to add to our theoretical and empirical knowledge, which informed the purpose of our study and associated research question (Kallio et al., 2016). The central topics guiding the formulation of the semi-structured questions consisted of university/program involvement in club operations, university/program communication with clubs, and university/program barriers to club operations. We developed main theme and pre-determined follow-up questions that were participant-oriented, open-ended, single-faceted, not leading, and clearly worded to solicit in-depth, unique, and vivid responses. Example main theme questions included: university/program involvement - 'How does the university provide resources and support to sport club teams?'; university/program communication - 'Describe your [recreational sport administrator] communication with sport club officers.'; and university/program barriers - 'What do you perceive as major hindrances or obstacles that keep sport clubs from operating at full capacity (e.g., university rules, regulations, or restrictions)?'. Note that we modified the main theme and pre-determined follow-up questions for

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sample

	Participants		Competitive Classification		Gender Classification		
	Student Officers	University Administrators	Competitive Clubs	Non-Competitive Clubs	Co-Ed Clubs	Women's Clubs	Men's Clubs
University A	38	2	11	2	8	3	2
University B	11	1	7	1	3	3	2
University C	19	1	6	2	4	1	3

Sports Represented Across Sample

Baseball (2)	Equestrian (3)	Ice Hockey (1)	Quidditch (1)	Soccer (1)	Water Polo (1)
Basketball (2)	Field Hockey (1)	Jude (1)	Rock Climbing (1)	Tennis (1)	
Bowling (1)	Fishing (1)	Lacrosse (1)	Rugby (2)	Triathlon (1)	
Crew (1)	Gymnastics (2)	Outdoor Adventure (1)	Running (1)	Ultimate Frisbee (3)	

Student Officer Roles Represented Across Sample

President (27)	Secretary (7)	Fundraising (2)	Coach (2)	Discipline (1)
Vice President (16)	Treasurer (7)	Social Media (2)	Safety (2)	Recruitment (1)

the focus group protocol and interview guide to account for the unique population engaged. The content and construction of the tools were reviewed by eight experts in qualitative methodology and collegiate recreation, with slight revisions made to the order and framing of questions based on feedback received. The semi-structured nature of the tools also allowed us to ask spontaneous probing questions to encourage participants to clarify and expound upon their responses (Shenton, 2004).

Upon receiving written informed consent, we facilitated 29 focus groups, lasting approximately 60 minutes, with 68 student officers at their respective university campuses. Each focus group consisted of approximately three student officers representing one sport club. We also conducted individual in-person interviews with four university recreational sport administrators. The focus groups and interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and reviewed to enhance data credibility. The typed transcriptions were sent to corresponding participants for member checking, with participants instructed to review, clarify, correct, and/or expound on their responses (Shenton, 2004). In addition to conducting focus groups and interviews, we collected publicly accessible documents about CSCs on the universities' websites, such as student organization handbooks, sport club manuals, and student codes of conduct. These public documents provided contextual information to validate and illuminate participants' assertions and enhance the study's credibility (Shenton, 2004). We collected 29 documents across the three universities, outlining institutional rules, policies, and procedures impacting CSC operations.

Data Analysis

We conducted thematic analysis, adhering to Braun et al.'s (2019) six-phase process, to answer our research question. Before coding the data, the first author and peer debriefer reviewed the transcripts and documents to get a sense of the data and note initial ideas pertaining to the research question. Next, the first author inductively coded the data at the semantic (i.e., descriptive codes) and latent (i.e., interpretive codes) levels to identify and label relevant text within the data. The preliminary codes were compared across data sources and modified throughout the coding process to better fit the data corpus. Each code was associated with a descriptive label, inclusion and exclusion criterion, example data excerpts, and proposed relationships to other codes. After coding, the first author looked for areas of similarity and overlap in the codes to identify meaningful patterns in the data, subsequently informing the overarching themes and subthemes. These (sub)themes were then reviewed concerning the associated data extracted and the dataset to ensure they meaningfully captured the data and addressed the study research questions. The final themes and subthemes were defined, with exemplar quotes identified. The first author engaged a peer debriefer throughout the analytic process, meeting regularly to discuss semantic and latent codes, relationships between codes, and constructed themes and subthemes until mutual agreement was met (Shenton, 2004).

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data was enhanced through strategies addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). We accomplished credibility by collecting multiple data sources from diverse populations through student officer focus groups, university administrator interviews, and public documents to corroborate our findings; reflecting throughout the data collection and analysis process; and conducting member checks (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010). To achieve transferability and dependability, we provide a rich description of the CSC programs and participants studied, data collection tools and procedures, and analytic techniques within this methods section. Further, we used peer debriefing to establish confirmability throughout the data analysis process.

Results

We conducted thematic analysis across the data sources to explore perceived institutional barriers impeding CSC operational effectiveness. Three overarching themes emerged: 1) institutional rules, policies, and procedures perceived as both effective and ineffective for club operations; 2) university constraints perceived as barriers to club operations; 3) and club constraints perceived as barriers to club operations. The analysis illuminated the layers of bureaucratic red tape sport club officers must navigate, highlighting university and club constraints that exacerbate the impact of institutional barriers on CSCs.

Institutional Rules, Policies, Procedures

When asked to describe sport club operations, club officers consistently juxtaposed internal operations within the context of institutional rules, policies, and procedures. The Basketball club from University B explained it best, "It's trying to operate how you want but still meeting and following … the guidelines that you have to follow." Sport club officers articulated university regulations on club eligibility, executive boards, resource allocations, financial activities, risk, travel, and marketing (see Table 2), with resource management the most heavily discussed topic and risk management the least. When describing the institutional rules, policies, and procedures regulating sport club operations, some sport club officers explained the regulations as an accepted part of club operations. For example, a Rugby club officer from University C articulated, "We have to fill out paperwork with [University C] to reapply to have our field, to have our games set up, to make sure that we're compliant with all of [University C]'s rules …" This suggests university bureaucracy is not a perceived barrier to all clubs, but rather a necessary mechanism to operate effectively. However, many clubs spoke in frustration when describing university regulations, suggesting the institutional rules, policies, and procedures act as a hindrance to club operations and should be considered a university constraint. For example, an Equestrian Western officer from University A explained:

> Everything has to be check requested online with an invoice … it takes three to four weeks for that request to go through and be approved, and then it could take another three to four weeks for the check to be ready… and then by the time we pick up the check we might have already passed the event that we had to use that check for.

These frustrations were recognized by all recreational sport administrators, with sentiments such as: "in the beginning it's probably very frustrating because it might seem like we're a barrier" (University A); "sometimes there's what feel as unnecessary hoops, or tape to jump through, but that's just part of doing business" (University B); and "there are a lot of policies or procedures they have to follow that they're not used to, having to … cross the t's and dot the i's" (University C).

Table 2

Institutional Rules, Policies, Procedures

Themes Identified	Clubs	Admin	Docs
University Regulation of Club Eligibility			
Club coaches must be approved by the university	A		B, C
Clubs require faculty / staff advisor		C	A, B, C
Clubs required to maintain updated roster	B		A, B, C
Clubs require minimum club membership	B, C	A	A, B, C
Club membership restricted to eligible students	B, C		A, B, C
Clubs required to compete to remain active			C
Clubs subject to university adjudication process for infractions	B	B	A, B, C
University Regulation of Club Executive Boards			
Club officers required to fulfill standardized roles	A	A	A, B, C
Club officers required to attend university trainings / meetings	B	B, C	A, B, C
Club officers required to establish club as student organization	B, C	A	A, B, C
Club officers required to maintain a formal constitution	A		A, B, C
University Regulation of Club Resource Allocations			
University allocations determined by compliance / merit point system	C	C	B, C
Club budget request evaluated by sport club council		A	B

Club facility / equipment request evaluated by department	A, C	A, B, C	A, B, C
Club on-campus special events require university approval	C	A	A, B, C
New clubs must demonstrate financial viability during probationary year			B, C
Clubs required to match % of club budget through fundraising			B
University Regulation of Club Financial Activities			
Clubs not granted access to financial account	B	A, B, C	A, B, C
Clubs required to uphold university cash handling procedures	A		A, B, C
Clubs required to submit receipts to get reimbursed	A	B, C	A, B, C
Clubs required to submit invoice for funding advance request	A	A, C	A, B, C
Clubs receive pre-paid credit card for club expenses	C	B, C	B
Clubs restricted to university approved fundraising activities	A	A, B	A, B, C
Clubs restricted to university approved vendors / sponsors / venues	C	A, B, C	A, B, C
Clubs use of finances restricted to university approved purchases	A	A, B, C	A, B, C
University Regulation of Club Risk			
Clubs required to complete safety certifications (e.g., First Aid)			A, B, C
Clubs required to submit liability forms (e.g., waiver, insurance)		A, C	A, B, C
High-risk clubs required to complete concussion baseline testing		B	B
Clubs required to submit accident report form for injuries		C	A, B, C
Clubs required to uphold university's minors policy			A
Clubs required to uphold university code of conduct (e.g., hazing, discrimination)		C	A, B, C
Club contractual agreements require university approval			B, C

University Regulation of Club Travel

Club permitted vehicles restricted by driving distance	C		C
Clubs driving university vehicles restricted to qualified members		B	B, C
Clubs required to submit travel authorization forms prior to travel	A, B	A, B, C	A, B, C
Clubs required to submit post-trip / post-game report		C	A, B
University Regulation of Club Marketing			
Club use of university trademarks regulated	A, B, C	A, C	A, B, C
Club promotional activities on-campus regulated by university			A, B, C

Sport club officers' identification of institutional rules, policies, and procedures regulating club operations was accurate, as all identified regulations were confirmed by either recreational sport administrators or university documents. Further, most regulations outlined in university documents were also mentioned by recreational sport administrators, illustrating their critical role in sport club governance. The regulations outlined in Table 2 illustrate the complexity of the university system, with some regulations constraining clubs – such as restrictions around use of university resources, some regulations adding administrative responsibilities – such as submitting required documentation, and a few regulations supporting club operations – such as the provision of a pre-paid credit card. All institutional rules, policies, and procedures identified by officers and administrators were explained in detail in publicly available university documents. For example, while the Hunter Jumpers club from University A broadly exclaimed, "You can only spend your allocation money towards what they tell you," the university's Purchase Payment Request form and Student Organization Handbook provided specific instructions for how to get approval and guidelines for permissible vs. prohibited purchases. As a whole, university student organization handbooks - ranging from 43-88 pages in length – were the primary source of information for institutional rules, polices, and procedures. Given these regulations are largely created by the division of student affairs that oversees all student clubs, recreational sport administrators may have limited authority to reduce the university bureaucracy governing sport clubs.

The officers' evaluation of university regulations was often in contrast to administrators' evaluation due to incongruent values and unrealistic expectations, a lack of awareness of how regulations have improved over time, and a lack of understanding regarding the reasons for specific rules, policies, and procedures. For example, concussion baseline testing was viewed as a hindrance and inconvenient task by club officers at University B, yet articulated as a benefit by the administrators who described the practice as a progressive trend in the National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA: Leaders in Collegiate Recreation). Recreational sport

administrators were able to articulate a clear purpose or reason for many of the institutional rules, policies, and procedures discussed, highlighting justifications about university liability, competition for university resources, club sustainability, student protection, etc. An administrator from University A shared, "The more they work with us, they understand there is a reason why we're doing things the way we are doing them." The administrators alluded that increased club officer awareness and understanding of institutional rules, policies, and processes might mitigate perceived barriers.

University Constraints

The potential burden of institutional rules, policies, and procedures was amplified by university constraints identified by sport club officers and administrators alike, with no indication of university constraints present in the documents analyzed (see Table 3). University constraints included: limited university resources, organizational problems, and interorganizational conflict. The greatest university constraint contributing to the bureaucratic red tape was the competition for scarce resources. Sport club officers and administrators identified money, facility space, equipment, transportation, and administrative support as the major resource constraints, with access to funding and facilities the greatest issue. For example, an administrator at University A explained, "All these clubs [are] expensive to run and manage… We have some minor funding that they are eligible for, but most of the funding for the operations comes out of their own pocket." At University B, the administrator lamented, "We're losing space every day it seems … we started this year with two fields and one shared field with athletics. And now we're down to one field." They went on to explain the addition of a new varsity sport (sand volleyball) resulted in the loss of a club (rugby) field, highlighting the battle over university space.

Student officers from a few clubs across the three universities – including Quidditch, Outdoor Adventure, Baseball, and Rugby - had unrealistic expectations of the resources they were entitled to. For example, the Rugby club at University C, who stated, "We're playing at a D1A level but … we're only recognized … at a club capacity… We only get the club funding for the travel. We don't get any equipment support; we don't get any extra fundraising." However, the majority of sport club officers and administrators lamented over the difficulty of operating with scarce resources for a club-level program, as the recreational sport administrators from University B shared, "this gets me a little fired up because … this is my passion, this is my career, and I see us struggling." The competition for resources necessitated resource allocation procedures, adding to the complexity of university regulations. To illustrate this, the administrators from University B explained:

> [University] vans and buses, those are accessible to anybody on campus so those can get swiped up pretty quickly cause … there's only a few buses, so getting that stuff [travel authorization forms] in, in ample time allows me to accommodate them as best I can and get them the things they need when they travel.

Table 3

University Constraints

Themes Identified	Clubs	Admin	Docs
Scarce Resources			
Money	A, C	A, B, C	
Facility space	A, B, C	A, B, C	
Equipment	B, C	A	
Transportation	A	A	
Administrative support	C	A, B	
Organizational Problems			
Administrators' lack of knowledge	A		
Administrators' poor communication & coordination	A, C	A, B	
Administrators' disorganization & mistakes	A, B, C	A, B	
Interorganizational Conflict			
Poor relationships	A, B		
Areas for Improvement			
Enhanced organization & communication		A, B	
Increased leadership training		A	
Create sport club manual		A, B	
Promote / advocate for sport clubs		A	
Improve relationships with clubs		A, C	

There was only one university constraint that was described as intentional based on the sport club model – administrative support. An administrator at University A shared:

> This [sport club] program is so unique compared to anything else we do because we want the leaders to do all the work… We can program tournaments and leagues and practices, we're not learning anything by doing that. But by them doing that … they're learning. I think that's really the critical piece. It's not how many games they win and lose. It's how well they're learning.

Organizational problems and interorganizational conflict were additional university constraints associated with institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Sport club officers conveyed frustrations concerning the sport club administrators' knowledge of institutional rules, policies, and procedures, communication and coordination, and their ability to stay organized to avoid making mistakes that impede club

operations. For example, a Hunter Jumpers club officer from University A shared, "Sometimes when it comes down to it, the Rec isn't the most helpful… When we have our stuff together, we're expecting them … to have their stuff together and it's not always that way." Poor communication was the most frequently discussed university constraint, recognized by both officers and administrators. The Judo club from University A exemplified this constraint when sharing, "It took them a month to get back to me about anything." The administrator at University B provided helpful insight explaining delayed communication:

> We rely on a lot of other departments on campus … we work with transportation, we work with our accounts payable, etc… I have to rely on other people throughout the university to get things in line, so that your buses are ready, your travel card is amply loaded, because unfortunately I don't have the capability, that's just not what I'm allowed to do. There's other people on campus that that's their job.

Further, a couple clubs alluded to poor relations between the university and sport clubs, claiming: "the university for some reason doesn't like us very much" (Baseball, University B); and "he was actually trying to shut us down" (Water Polo, University A). However, this was only perceived by club officers, not administrators.

While the recreational sport administrators primarily discussed how particular institutional rules, policies, and procedures—created at the university-level—acted as a barrier for their program to operate successfully, they also recognized opportunities for improvement within their program. Interestingly, the university with the most frequently cited constraints also reported the most strategies for improvement, demonstrating transparency and accountability. The recreational sport administrator shared, "We've been in a lot of transition … we have our list of things that we know we need to do better." The predominant areas of improvement discussed included enhancing organization and communication of program expectations, processes, and changes; increasing student leadership training; creating a sport club officer how-to manual; promoting and advocating for sport clubs; and improving relationships with sport clubs. For example, an administrator from University A shared:

> I think we need to do a better job in the very beginning of the semester … giving a review as to what's going on, what our expectations are, and explaining the processes… But then I see the flip side of even when we do that it sometimes doesn't sink in. So, we're battling the knowledge.

Club Constraints

Sport club constraints were also found to amplify the impact of institutional rules, policies, and processes on sport club operations (see Table 4). Though sport club constraints were only identified by recreational sport administrators, suggesting a lack of awareness among club officers for how their club impedes its own operational effectiveness. Administrators identified poor communication, poor planning and documentation, poor decisions, and centralized leadership with no succession plan as the major sport club constraints. While sport club operations depend on the voluntary work of sport club officers, the administrators recognized clubs prioritized

sports participation over club operations. An administrator from University A noted, "I think what I've noticed, the clubs love to practice, they love the competition, but it's the communication and the behind-the-scenes stuff that isn't there," and shared the example, "sending an email when you want to do something tomorrow [is] not the best way to communicate."

Table 4

Club Constraints

Themes Identified	Clubs	Admin	Docs
Poor communication		A, B	
Poor planning and documentation		A, B, C	
Poor decisions		A, B	
Centralized leadership with no succession plan		A, B, C	

With club operations treated as secondary, many clubs struggled with planning and submitting appropriate documentation on time, with an administrator from University C explaining, "lack of planning on their part doesn't constitute an emergency on my part … A lot of them don't think that far ahead." An administrator from University A shared an example of poor documentation, "If they decide to go down a cash payment option. Where, 'hey, let's gather the team, everybody got a couple bucks, let's pay the official.' And that official then says I never got paid, how do you prove it?" and then explained why clubs fail to document explaining, "I think it's being done because of a few factors. One, it's easier, two it requires time for us to get a check cut … they are more worried about the game, sometimes than that administrative side of things." However, recreational sport administrators consistently communicated sympathy for new sport club officers learning the institutional rules, policies, and procedures, as an administrator from University A shared, "Sometimes it's their first time ever doing it … So that's where it's not a frustrating thing to me, it's they don't know." Outside of poor communication, planning, and documentation on institutional rules, policies, and procedures, administrators reported a few clubs make obvious poor decisions, impacting their experience of university regulations. An administrator at University C gave the example, "[Lacrosse team] had drinking incidences, they had hazing incidences, … they spent about 5000 dollars on non-approved uniforms that they abruptly had to throw away…"

While poor communication, planning, documentation, and decisions appeared to be distinct incidences impacting club operations, a sport club's organizational structure was found to holistically impact a club's ability to adhere to institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Sport clubs adopting a centralized leadership structure were found least effective. An administrator from University B explained:

> I think some operate [where] just the president does everything… The people that try and keep it all to themselves really struggle. Because it's a lot to manage on top of probably having a job and taking ya know 15 credits.

The issue of over-extended students was reported across recreational sport administrators, with an administrator from University A sharing:

> I get this sense that many of our clubs aren't taking that time [for club operations] because students get busier and busier … our club leader is not just the soccer club president, they're also the secretary for their sorority.

The issue of centralized leadership was exacerbated when clubs lacked a succession plan to identify and recruit future leaders. For example, an administrator from University A described, "A lot of times we just have people like, 'hey I'm graduating, do you want to be the president?' 'Okay, no problem.' And so it just becomes a hand off kind of thing. And that's not typically very successful." The sport clubs suggested to be most successful divided responsibilities across several club officers, maintained communication with the administrators, demonstrated effective time management, and sought to understand and adhere to institutional rules, policies, and procedures.

Discussion

The study's main purpose was to uncover any institutional barriers that impede the operational effectiveness of CSCs. Three main themes surfaced: institutional rules, policies, and procedures; university constraints; and sport club constraints. The subthemes that emerged from the data align with 10 of the organizational constraints outlined in the literature (Pindek & Spector, 2016; Spector & Jex, 1998), minus interruptions by other people. The most prominent organizational constraints reported were organizational rules and procedures and poor/scarce resources. Further, a new organizational constraint was identified – mistakes and/or poor decisions. The following discussion is organized by the three main themes from our study.

Institutional Rules, Policies, and Procedures

Applying Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2007) bioecological model, the bureaucratic structure of the university (context-macrosystem) manifested through institutional rules, policies, and procedures (process) and enforced by the recreational sport club program (context-mesosystem), was a perceived hindrance to sport club operations (context-microsystem) by club officers, yet a perceived benefit by recreational sport administrators. This finding is consistent with the literature (Bronfenbrenner, 1999; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021; Tudge et al., 2016). This incongruence may reflect the unique characteristics (person) of sport clubs at the program- and club-levels. Moreover, sport club programs have been characterized by a complex and formal organizational structure, with standardized processes that mirror the bureaucratic structure at the university level (Springer et al., 2024). Comparatively, individual sport clubs have been characterized by a simple organizational structure, with a low degree of formality to adapt within a changing club environment due to high officer turnover (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). Perhaps due to this simple structure, club officers expressed difficulty navigating the extraordinary number of institutional rules, policies, and procedures. Despite the compliance burden university bureaucracy can place on sport clubs, recreational sport administrators argued the rules, policies, and

procedures are necessary to properly manage clubs and mitigate university liability. This begs the question, are these institutional rules, policies, and procedures helpful or hurtful?

Scholars have coined ineffective organizational rules – such as those with no legitimate purpose that create a compliance burden (Blom et al., 2021) - as 'red tape' and effective organizational rules – including "written requirements, with valid means-ends relationships, which employ optimal control, are consistently applied, and have purposes understood by stakeholders" (DeHart-Davis, 2008, p. 362) - as 'green tape'. Previous research has noted that while some institutional rules may help provide infrastructure, many are restrictive such as allowable purchases and regulation of the university trademark (Czekanski et al., 2023; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021), highlighting the tension between how institutional rules, policies, and procedures act as facilitators and barriers to club operations. It is common for stringent policies to lead to organizational disaster through overcontrol, over-compliance, misplaced precision, and red tape (Bozeman & Anderson, 2016), which can impede sport clubs from reaching their goals (Rundio & Buning, 2022). Further, Hattke et al. (2020) contend perceived bureaucratic red tape often leads to negative emotions among organizational members like confusion, frustration, and anger, which can adversely affect members' perceived organizational culture, engagement, motivation, satisfaction, performance, and persistence (Blom et al., 2021). Blom et al. (2021) noted having different opinions about red and green tape within an organization is normal. However, clashing opinions may cause friction between the parties involved if they do not proceed with caution. Friction between recreational sport administrators and club officers may result in ineffective communication and cooperation, negatively affecting sport club operations and effectiveness. On the flip side, Skyberg (2022) argues friction between parties has the potential to lead to creativity and innovation if intentionally addressed.

University Constraints

University constraints revolved around limited resources, organizational problems, and interorganizational conflict. Resource scarcity is an increasing concern due to the recent global pandemic, which has especially impacted the financial situation of higher education institutions (Kara, 2021). This further affects campus programs, facilities, and services – showing the influence of the macro-environment on the meso- and micro-systems within. When considering college sport programs, the university resources dedicated to varsity sports like funding, facilities/equipment, administrative support, and student services far exceed the resources available for sport clubs (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). This may be due to the unique characteristics of sport clubs, which are classified as student organizations and thus expected to secure their own resources to support club operations through fundraising, facility reservations, use of member equipment, etc. (Lower & Czekanski, 2019; Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). Because resources are scarce at the program level, competition is created between clubs to obtain such resources. This interorganizational competition for resources can negatively impact club re-

lationships and create a cutthroat mentality contributing to a toxic culture. To et al. (2020) indicated competition has more negative effects when there is a presence of uncertainty surrounding rules. As such, the complexity of navigating the university bureaucracy, such as financial allocation rules and procedures, may exacerbate the issue of competition due to scarce resources.

The organizational problems and interorganizational conflict noted by club officers have been reported in previous research examining the social exchange relationship between universities and sport clubs. Moreover, Lower-Hoppe et al. (2021) and Czekanski et al. (2023) reported clubs criticizing program staff's poor communication, disorganization, and inconsistent enforcement of institutional rules, policies, and procedures, which adversely affected clubs' ability to operate and achieve their goals. Perhaps the lack of human resources has spread the recreation department too thin, with sport club programs of one to three full-time professional staff responsible for overseeing upwards of 50+ sport clubs (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2023).

Sport Club Constraints

The recreational sport administrators identified poor communication, poor strategic planning and documentation, and centralized leadership as the major sport club constraints. Clubs' low degree of formality likely contributes to their poor communication, planning, and documentation. Research has shown that club officers typically only meet on an 'as-needed' basis (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021), primarily communicate through informal group messages (Czekanski & Lower, 2019), and share documentation through flash drives or shared drives that can be lost in leader transition (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Meeting sporadically and communicating through informal mediums restricts club documentation, planning, and information sharing between club officers, members, and university administrators. More broadly, without a formal organizational structure and consistent communication processes, clubs may struggle to master and comply with the complex institutional rules, policies, and procedures and pass their institutional knowledge on to incoming club officers.

The centralized sport club leadership confirms prior research, which suggests clubs control decision-making at the club apex (executive board) to efficiently navigate the constantly changing university system (Czekanski & Lower, 2019). However, this places significant responsibility on the few club members serving in leadership roles, which can be exhausting and lead to burnout (Bryant & Clement, 2015; Hattke et al., 2020). Further, sport club officers have reported greater interest in sport and social activities than their administrative club responsibilities which may contribute to the organizational problems noted by the recreational sport administrators (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). While students volunteer to serve on the club executive board, they are still club members and (perhaps more importantly) college students and, therefore, have divided attention and limited time. This collectively supports the idea that responsibilities should be further divided to limit exhaustion and increase the effectiveness of club members in leadership roles. In all, institutional rules, policies, and procedures were the most prominent barriers to sport clubs operating effectively. Therefore, it is critical to mitigate the central barrier to hopefully ease the other related barriers.

Implications

The study findings have program- and club-level implications for mitigating institutional barriers that impede CSCs from operating effectively.

Program-level

To increase green tape and decrease red tape at the program level, recreational sport administrators should evaluate institutional rules, policies, and procedures—particularly those at the department- or program-level where they have a degree of control—to assess the purpose of the rule/policy/procedure and the burden it places on clubs (Blom et al., 2021; DeHart-Davis, 2008). For example, recreational sport departments manage their budget allocation and facility reservation systems which could be modified to accommodate diverse club needs. This insight will help programs discern what rules, policies, and/or procedures can be eliminated or revised to decrease the compliance burden on clubs and which must be maintained to mitigate university liability and operate effectively as a program. Programs are encouraged to provide sport club officers training and resources, such as a sport club manual, to increase their knowledge and understanding of institutional rules, policies, and procedures so they can navigate the university bureaucracy effectively and share this institutional knowledge with future club leaders (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021).

To mitigate the possible friction between recreational sport administrators and sport club officers, these stakeholder groups should engage in value co-creation. Moreover, recreational sport administrators can work with club officers in the "product/service design process," whereby the stakeholder groups interact and share knowledge of current/future needs and control to enable joint action that advances mutually beneficial goals (Ranjan & Read, 2016, p. 292). This can be accomplished through the use of a sport club council. The council can be comprised of club officers elected by administrators or their club peers to serve as a liaison between the department and clubs, advocate for club needs, enhance information, participate in program-level decision making, and translate the purpose of institutional rules, policies, and procedures to their club members (Czekanski & Lower, 2019; Springer et al., 2024). Intentionally seeking out sport club engagement in program administration may contribute to a more positive and effective interorganizational relationship and collaboration between the parties.

To navigate scarce resources, programs should educate clubs on identifying and securing the resources necessary to operate, such as funding, facility space, and equipment. This training may include instruction on university rules and processes for acquiring university funding, making purchases, reserving university facility space, and leasing university equipment, which may alleviate the competition for resources and promote a positive organizational culture (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2020). Programs can also connect clubs with potential fundraising opportunities and donors (Lower & Czekanski, 2019) – much like we are seeing in collegiate athletics with departments connecting student-athletes with name, image, and likeness (NIL) endorsement opportunities (NCAA, 2022). Further, programs can allow individuals to

donate directly to individual sport clubs, and market this opportunity to club parents, fans, and alumni.

Club-level

To manage the expansive operations of a sport club, the leadership responsibilities should be divided across a sizeable executive board of 5-10 officers (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Dividing responsibilities will help club officers share the workload, manage their time, hone their skills, and avoid burnout (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2023). Weese (1994) noted individuals should focus on one duty at a time to complete tasks efficiently and effectively. Scholars and practitioners recommend club executive boards include, at minimum, a president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary and consider additional roles such as social media/marketing chair, fundraising chair, safety officer, and team captain (Lower & Czekanski, 2019). Club members can learn valuable skills from these leadership roles, including social, vocational, and practical competence (Flosdorf et al., 2016). Therefore, increasing opportunities for club members to serve in leadership roles can benefit club operations and individual development.

While expanding the club executive board may increase the capacity of club officers to manage club operations, it can also make communication more challenging. To enhance communication across the board, club officers should engage in regular formal meetings to share information, discuss club operations, ensure compliance with institutional rules, policies, and procedures, and advance strategic planning and initiatives (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2021). It is also critical to maintain good communication with club members; therefore, facilitating periodic club meetings to keep members informed, gather their input, and vote on club decisions will enhance the social exchange relationship between the board and club members and the effectiveness of the club as a whole (Czekanski et al., 2023). Within these meetings, the club secretary should be responsible for recording minutes to document club decisions (Lower & Czekanski, 2019), which can help officers share critical information with the recreational sport administrators overseeing the program and pass club knowledge on to future leaders in the club. Additionally, these meeting also provide an opportunity for the club to review their club constitution for any necessary revisions. Lastly, it is the club's responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities provided by the program to enhance their operations, such as participating in leadership trainings, serving on the sport club council, and reviewing program materials.

Limitations and Future Directions

While this study increases our understanding of the institutional barriers impeding CSCs' operational effectiveness, it is not without limitations. First and foremost, qualitative research brings limitations related to data trustworthiness (Guba, 1981). Using focus groups and interview methodology raises the issue that participants might offer socially acceptable responses rather than accurately answering the posed questions. We sought to mitigate this threat to internal validity by explaining confidentiality to encourage honest responses during the recruitment and data collection

process. Additionally, despite including multiple universities in the study, the qualitative nature of the research means "it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations" (Shenton, 2004, p. 69). Therefore, the findings cannot be transferred to other sport club programs in America or worldwide. Future scholars thus need to apply and test our study's findings within their own population to determine what institutional barriers exist.

We encourage future research to explore institutional barriers in a wider range of university (e.g., Canadian institutions, small liberal arts colleges) and program (e.g., competitive sport programs that oversee both intramural and club sports) environments to distinguish dominant barriers from those institution-specific. Furthermore, researchers may consider including additional key actors who influence and are impacted by institutional rules, policies, and procedures, such as administrators in the division of student affairs, sport club graduate assistants, and club members. A greater understanding of the interplay between CSCs and their university can inform policy development, club management, and program-club cooperation to support clubs' operational effectiveness.

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