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Programs that Work

Community-University Partnerships: The Benefits of Collaboration in Measuring Public Support for a Community Recreation Center

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Executive Summary

Community recreation centers (CRCs) are gaining popularity across the country. While many support the argument that CRCs improve quality of life by building social capital and improving the physical health of residents, that support does not necessarily translate into community support for the funding and construction of CRCs. Some communities undertake surveys to try to gauge the support for CRCs but have had mixed results on the insights provided by those surveys. Furthermore, public perceptions about the accuracy and usefulness of survey data could lead to stakeholder disregard for the data produced by them. This case study focuses on the benefits of a robust partnership between a local community and a regional university in developing a survey research project to analyze support for building a CRC. In this paper, we emphasize the value of producing trusted data and provide lessons on how community-university partnerships can achieve similar objectives. The first lesson is that community-university partnerships, by emphasizing local connections, can help foster trust in survey research projects. Second, strategic community-university partnerships can derive additional benefits such as division of labor, expertise, and cost savings. Third, by embracing the above two benefits, collaboration is not only possible, but can produce tailored survey research projects that provide stakeholders insights into critical questions. Finally, community-university partnerships that are structured around shared values can help communities solve critical policy issues effectively and efficiently. This case study details these lessons through an examination of a robust community-university partnership that led to the passage of a ballot referendum to build a CRC. This community-university model of collaboration provides a framework for communities and universities to work together to serve the public good.

Keywords

Community-university partnerships, community recreation centers, community surveys, referendum, trust in government

Introduction

Community recreation centers (CRCs) have been incorporated into the growth of municipal parks and recreation programs over the last 100 years. However, that growth has been much greater in urban areas than in rural areas (Payne & Schaumleffel, 2008). Witt and Caldwell (2010) argue that the initial growth of CRCs in urban areas was developed to accommodate children of working parents who would otherwise be left to play in the streets. Recent studies have expanded the growth in CRCs as being driven by quality-of-life factors such as building social capital (Colistra et al., 2017; Mullenbach et al., 2018) and improved physical health (Moody et al., 2004; National Recreation and Park Association, 2019). Grand Junction, Colorado, a mid-size community in western Colorado with abundant outdoor recreation opportunities, has been exploring developing a CRC for several decades. In 2023, Grand Junction voters approved the funding and construction of their own CRC.

In this paper, we provide background information on Grand Junction and previous attempts to develop a CRC. Then we describe the community-university partnership created to develop and conduct a survey measuring citizen attitudes about building and funding a CRC. We provide the methods and results of the Grand Junction Community Recreation Center survey. Finally, we describe the implications for management by identifying the key lessons learned from this community-university partnership case study.

Background

Numerous outdoor recreation opportunities exist in Grand Junction, as approximately 72% of Mesa County contains public land owned and managed by a number of government agencies (e.g., U.S. Forest Service and U.S. Bureau of Land Management). The City of Grand Junction has a total of 1,842 acres of land including 35 developed parks and 21 miles of urban and riverfront trails operated and maintained by the Parks and Recreation Department. The city also manages one outdoor pool, one indoor pool, numerous athletic fields, and an amphitheater. (City of Grand Junction, 2021).

Despite Grand Junction being the largest city on the western slope of Colorado with approximately 65,000 residents, it does not have a CRC included in its recreation portfolio. By comparison, five cities on the western slope ranging in population from 7,000 to 21,000 have a CRC operated by their cities.

Anecdotal evidence suggests the idea for building a CRC in Grand Junction surfaced in the 1970s. The first serious effort grew out of a high school senior project in 2000, when students proposed that the city build a CRC. As part of their project, students met the city's Parks and Recreation Department and several community groups culminating with a meeting with the city council. However, the ballot measure that followed failed to receive voter approval (Hess, 2023). The next effort moved forward in 2018 following a feasibility study conducted by the city's Parks and Recreation Department. The study led to a proposed 98,000-square-foot CRC to be funded by a .39% increase in city sales tax. Voters rejected the referendum in 2019 with nearly 55% of voters voting against the CRC (City of Grand Junction, 2019).

Following the failed referendum, the city's Parks and Recreation Board and Master Plan Advisory Committee moved forward in developing a Parks, Recreation, and Open Space Master Plan released in January 2021 (City of Grand Junction, 2021). The resulting master plan addressed multiple aspects of planning such as parks and fa-

cilities, departmental operations, and recreation programs. The master plan identified building a CRC as a top priority for the city's Parks and Recreation Department.

Community-University Partnership

In the fall of 2021, the city's Parks and Recreation Department contacted the Social Research Center (SRC) of Colorado Mesa University (CMU) to develop and conduct a survey measuring citizen attitudes about building and maintaining a CRC. CMU is a regional institute of higher education that serves the citizens of Colorado with an emphasis on a 14-county region of Western Colorado (CMU, 2024a). The CMU SRC was created in 2016 and "serves as a hub for university, community and governmental partners to work collaboratively on questions related to social issues" (CMU, 2024b). From its inception, SRC leadership embraced the idea that funding a full-service, comprehensive research center is prohibitively expensive, so it was decided that the SRC would embrace partnerships to better serve community data needs. A unique attribute of the SRC is to segment social research tasks across different partners. One of those partnerships is with the Center for Opinion Research at Franklin & Marshall College (F&M), whose expertise is in developing and implementing professional, multi-mode, opinion research.

When approached by the city's Parks and Recreation department, leadership in the SRC assembled a team to determine the best, most cost-efficient method of helping the city answer its questions. The team included experts in political science, public administration, statistics, and opinion research. It was concluded that a multi-mode survey of registered Grand Junction voters would provide the city a cost-effective method of soliciting valid feedback on voter support for/opposition to building and managing a tax-funded CRC.

The survey focused on three primary topics: (1) level of support for building an indoor CRC, (2) consideration of several potential funding mechanisms for financing CRC construction, and (3) preferred building location and amenities of a CRC. Overall, the survey showed strong support for building a CRC in north-central Grand Junction (Matchett Park) funded by a 15% tax on nicotine products. The survey results were presented to the Grand Junction City Council in April 2022. A year later, 60% of voters approved a .14% sales tax increase to construct an indoor CRC at Matchett Park.

Methods

Design of the survey instrument was led by the academic researchers from CMU and F&M who sought input from local government employees, including members of the Parks and Recreation Department. Since the prior voter referendum to obtain funding that took place in 2019 was rejected by voters, special care was taken to design an instrument that could fully identify the demand and support for a CRC while simultaneously experimentally testing funding option preferences. The participation of local government employees helped the academic researchers understand specific concerns being expressed about prior and current CRC development so that these could be accounted for in the survey design.

The Center for Opinion Research at Franklin & Marshall College conducted a household survey of 1,286 registered voters between February 2 and 21, 2022, to understand Grand Junction, Colorado residents' interests, needs, and funding prefer-

ences for a community recreation center.[1] The sample of registered voters was obtained from Marketing Systems Group. All sampled respondents were notified by mail using municipal stationery about the survey. The mailer asked for participation in the survey, highlighted CMU's participation in the project, and was signed by the mayor. Interviews were completed in English and Spanish over the phone or online depending on each respondent's preference. Survey results were weighted (age, gender, race, participation in the 2019 CRC referendum, and party registration) using an iterative weighting algorithm to reflect the known distribution of those characteristics. The sample error for this survey is +/- 4.0 percentage points when the design effects from weighting are considered.

Final dispositions and cooperation and refusal rate calculations are based on standards established by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR, 2023). The cooperation rate for the survey was 79% (AAPOR CR1) and the refusal rate was 5% (AAPOR RefRate1). The total response rate was 33% (AAPOR RR4).[2] These high response rates are a reflection of the intentionality in messaging the value of the survey and the role of CMU in the research. The final, weighted survey estimates shown in Table 1 produced a representative sample that matched the population of registered voters in Grand Junction.

Results

As noted above, the data of most interest to stakeholders in the City of Grand Junction were responses to questions measuring the likelihood of support for construction of a CRC, the preferred method of funding such a project, and the preferred location for such a facility. Weighted survey responses regarding these items are shared in the tables that follow.

Tables 2 and 3 provide responses to two questions gauging general support for a CRC. These questions assessed, in essence, whether the funding and construction of a CRC would be a worthwhile pursuit for the city. As is evident in these tables, respondents felt overwhelmingly that it would be, with more than 80% responding favorably while approximately 15% indicated at least some degree of opposition for each question.

In addition to questions identifying support levels in general, this survey was utilized to test resident feelings regarding the specific funding mechanism to be implemented if a CRC were to be built. To do so, participants were first randomly assigned one of three funding options among a 0.15% sales tax increase, a 3 millage rate property tax increase, and a 15% tax on nicotine products; the first two options were clearly stated to end upon building pay-off.[3,4] These funding mechanisms were provided by

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[1]The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Franklin & Marshall College (application number R_DkJoPD6hkmgdFD3 approved 1/17/2022).

[2]Response rate definitions by AAPOR (AAPOR, 2023). Response Rates: The number of complete interviews with reporting units divided by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample. Cooperation Rates: The proportion of all cases interviewed out of all eligible units ever contacted. Refusal Rates: The proportion of all cases in which a housing unit or the selected respondent refuses to be interviewed or breaks off an interview out of all potentially eligible cases.

[3]Unless exempt, Colorado law requires that all tax increases from local governments require voter approval.

[4]Millage rates are used in calculating property tax. 1 mill is equivalent to a rate of $1 per $1,000 of assessed value or .001%

Table 1

Selected Population and Survey Respondent Characteristics

Group	Population Value	Final Survey Estimate
Male	48%	48%
Female	52%	53%
White	89%	87%
Other	11%	13%
18 - 34	23%	21%
35 - 54	36%	35%
55 or >	42%	44%
*Did not vote	64%	62%
*For	16%	19%
*Against	20%	19%

**Note:* for the 2019 CRC referendum

Table 2

Responses to the question, "Based on what you know, do you think Grand Junction should build an indoor Community Recreation Center for Grand Junction residents, or not?" (n = 1286)

Yes, definitely	Yes, probably	No, probably not	No, definitely not	Do not know	Prefer not to answer
59.2%	23.5%	7.3%	7.6%	2.3%	0.2%

Table 3

Responses to the question, "Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: the construction of an indoor Community Recreation Center would be a good use of Grand Junction city resources." (n = 1286)

Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Do not know	Prefer not to answer
57.8%	24.5%	5.5%	10.4%	1.5%	0.3%

city staff and based on realistic scenarios for funding a CRC. Participants were also reminded that funds from an already-approved cannabis tax earmarked for parks and recreation projects would be used in addition to whichever funding option they were presented.

Given a randomized funding option, participants were asked to indicate the likelihood of their support for CRC construction. These responses can be found in the body of Table 4. Once this question was answered, participants were then provided all funding possibilities and asked to indicate their preference. These responses are given in parentheses among the column headers in Table 4. Note that these three percentages do not add to 100%, as some participants indicated a preference not to fund CRC construction, that they did not know, or that they preferred not to answer.

The strongest indication of support came from those presented with the tax on nicotine products, with 61.6% of these respondents indicating that they would be "very likely" to support construction of the CRC. While respondents given the other two options were less bullish, a strong majority did still indicate that they would be either very or somewhat likely to support construction. It is also worth noting that, whereas only around 13% offered the nicotine tax indicated definite opposition to the project, more than 20% given the sales or property tax options were "not at all likely" to support it. Considering the funding option that elicited the least positivity—a sales tax increase—we still see nearly ⅔ indicating some degree of support and fewer than ⅓ expressing opposition. With respect to participants' preference for which approach should be taken to fund CRC construction, there is a clear favorite in the nicotine tax. Though not given in Table 4, note that 20% of respondents indicated a desire not to build a CRC when provided with all three funding possibilities.

Table 4

Responses to the question, "How likely are you to support construction of an indoor Community Recreation Center that is funded by [RANDOM FUND OPTION]?" (n = 434, 430, and 423, respectively). Funding mechanism preference indicated in parentheses along the top row.

Funding mechanism	0.15% sales tax increase (17.3%)	3 millage rate property tax increase (6.8%)	15% nicotine tax (48.8%)
Very likely	41.4%	41.2%	61.6%
Somewhat likely	24.7%	27.6%	16.8%
Somewhat unlikely	9.3%	8.7%	5.8%
Not at all likely	22.4%	21.5%	13.2%
Do not know	1.6%	1.1%	1.6%
Prefer not to answer	0.6%	0.1%	1.0%

The next question of interest centered on the construction site. To provide important context regarding the options available to survey participants, Lincoln Park is a well-known, large, multi-use space near the heart of the city. It includes a 9-hole golf course, a large outdoor swimming pool that is very busy throughout the summer, a public playground, tennis and pickleball courts, picnic tables and grills, horseshoe pits, a quarter-mile 8-lane track, a football stadium used for both high school and college games, and a baseball stadium that most notably hosts the National Junior College Athletic Association's Division 1 national championship tournament annually. Most of these facilities are served by a single large parking lot, though there is limited on-street parking adjacent to the park. In contrast, Matchett Park is a 205-acre undeveloped site approximately 2.5 miles northeast of Lincoln Park. It is near the city's northern edge but abuts a major east-west roadway and is surrounded by densely populated residential areas on three sides. The plan for Lincoln Park had the facility being constructed on the footprint of the existing outdoor pool without impacting other amenities, while the Matchett Park plan placed the new construction at the center of the undeveloped site.

As indicated in Table 5, respondents indicated a preference for Matchett Park, though a nontrivial amount did either prefer Lincoln Park (32%) or express uncertainty (17% "Do not know"). While not discussed in detail here, participants were also presented with the possibility of building multiple smaller facilities in different locations as opposed to one large, centralized facility. One facility was the clear preference, and other alternatives were never seriously considered by the city to the best of our knowledge.

Table 5
Preferred Location for a Community Recreation Center (n = 1286)

Lincoln Park	Matchett Park	Do not know	Prefer not to answer
32.2%	48.7%	17.3%	1.8%

A report detailing findings was delivered to the City of Grand Junction, and the research team presented results in a city council meeting open to the public. Ultimately, the city decided to pursue a ballot proposal, and it was put to voters in April of 2023. The ballot language included an increase of the city's sales and use tax rate from 3.25% to 3.39% to fund construction of an indoor CRC at Matchett Park. The ballot measure listed some of the amenities that would be included in the facility and placed dates on the beginning and ending times for this increase. This measure was approved by voters with 11,059 votes in favor (60.4%) and 7263 against (39.6%). The full measure and results are available online through the city's website (City of Grand Junction, 2023).

While the survey results indicated slightly higher support for this project than voters ultimately conveyed, the outcome is strikingly similar to what was predicted by the survey. Referring back to Table 4, among those offered the sales tax increase, 41.4% said they were "very likely" to support this as a ballot measure, while 24.7% were "somewhat likely." Considering the limitations of a survey, in which respondents did not have all the final details that would be in the actual ballot referendum it is not difficult to envision how support from voters, with all details finalized and available in the ballot referendum, was slightly lower than support from survey participants. Even so, the survey clearly provided a reasonable and accurate benchmark for voter support.

Management Implications

As detailed above, this partnership was beneficial, productive, and cost-effective while serving the public interest. For those interested in adopting this practice, the following lessons could prove useful:

Trust Through Local Connections

This community-university partnership proved to be an asset for this project. Most importantly, it allowed local experts from CMU to work with local stakeholders which built trust in the results. The takeaway is that this project freed local experts at CMU to focus on the city and community while leaving the survey research intricacies to the experts at F&M.

It is not news that over the last decade public opinion polls have taken a hit in the media and public eye. While there is evidence challenging this perception (Kennedy et al., 2018), there was a concern among the research team that data produced through polls could be disregarded by some stakeholders. As such, there was a concerted effort by the research team to foster trust in the data by emphasizing the objectivity of the researchers. From day one, the researchers became hyper-focused on the science of data collection and data analysis. For example, before any questions were added to the survey, it required a unanimous consensus from the research team and any disagreements were resolved through team meetings. The city's Parks and Recreation Department reviewed the survey prior to city council approving the survey instrument. Adherence to purpose (validity of data), process (collaboration and consensus), and mission (serve the public) produced data that was accepted as a valid snapshot of community opinions.

Strategic Community-University Partnership

In short, the partnership between the city, CMU, and F&M reduced costs, increased community buy-in, and provided a survey instrument that was tailored to the needs of stakeholders. This structure was also efficient as it divided labor around expertise and capacity. One example of cost savings was the mailing of notification letters to residents selected to participate in the survey. While the mailing list was generated by F&M using generally accepted sampling methods, the actual letters were printed, stuffed, and mailed by the Parks and Recreation Department. Most importantly, the research team decided that in addition to being cost-effective, letters mailed by the city from a local zip code with clear indication of the city's Parks and Recreation Department and the local university's (CMU) involvement in the survey were more likely to increase community participation.

Collaboration

The survey developed by the research team was a collaborative process and was designed from the ground up. While the research team was responsible for the validity of the survey, input from stakeholders was solicited and considered by the researchers. This allowed the researchers to use their expertise to design a valid survey while creating a feedback loop for stakeholders. No action was taken to include/exclude/modify questions in the survey without unanimous agreement from the research team. This tailored survey helped decision makers answer critical questions while giving the research team independence to follow established social scientific methods.

One example of collaboration relates to experimental testing of funding mechanisms for the CRC. As a policy issue, there was a diversity of opinions about how a

CRC should be funded. Some believed funding should come through a sales tax, others through a nicotine tax, while others supported a property tax. To answer this, the researchers worked with the stakeholders to include an experiment in the survey measuring support of the various tax measures. The results showed that while respondents preferred funding the CRC through a nicotine tax, they were supportive of funding the CRC through sales tax.

Providing the experimental test of funding mechanisms in the survey design provided statistical support for multiple funding mechanisms and allowed for greater deliberation on this issue. Deliberation on the part of key decision makers and ultimately the city council examined each source of funding. This deliberation noted that while the nicotine tax was the top choice of survey respondents, as a revenue source it is unpredictable, less stable, and highly regressive. The second choice of survey respondents was the property tax. Discussions on property tax as a revenue source raised concerns that businesses would be disproportionally impacted, and the city did not want to compete with the school district which relies heavily on property taxes. Deliberation on sales tax noted that it is an exportable tax with city residents only accounting for approximately 30% of the sales tax the city receives. It was also noted that all the other CRCs on the western slope were funded by sales tax. (City of Grand Junction, 2022). Ultimately, collaboration and trust in the survey results allowed city decision makers to be confident in choosing what they felt was the better funding mechanism.

Shared Values

As discussed above, in 2019 Grand Junction voters rejected a ballot initiative to build a CRC. The vote was 7,890 votes for and 9,453 against. For some, this result was a message to community leaders that voters will not support the construction and operation of a CRC. For others, the results were more complicated than that. This group claimed that there was community support for a CRC, but not in the 2019 election (which included numerous ballot issues) and not in the way the ballot issue was structured (the issue lacked a dedicated funding source such as legalized recreational marijuana).

By 2023, much of this had changed. Grand Junction voters had legalized recreational marijuana and subsequent tax revenues were earmarked for parks and recreation. The city had also listened to voters' concerns about asking for too much too quickly and adjusted their approach to the CRC. At the core of this approach was a dedication to data-driven decisions and community input. Shared values, commitment, and an excellent partnership between the city and university helped form the foundation of a strong partnership that served the public interest.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discuss the benefits of a healthy community-university partnership, and the role of trusted data, in the passage of a community recreation center in Colorado. We believe this model is transmissible to similarly situated communities and universities, and we provide some lessons learned through our experiences. As cities face complex problems, we hope that they find opportunities to work with local universities that are open to innovation and flexibility to serve the public good.

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