ABSTRACT

SMITH, EDWARD KYLE. Building Capacity for Grant Success: Insights from Local Parks and Recreation Agencies in North Carolina (Under the direction of Dr. Lincoln Larson).

Funding local parks and recreation agencies the conventional way, through appropriations from general tax funds, has become increasingly difficult. To mitigate the challenges associated with serving expanding populations with limited resources, parks and recreation agencies may pursue alternative funding sources to meet the recreation and leisure needs of the community. Grants act as one such funding source which allows local governments to pursue land acquisition and capital projects for parks and recreation.

Because grants require planning, resources, time, community involvement, collaboration and stakeholder investment, local parks and recreation agencies must possess a certain capacity to apply for and successfully receive funds. This exploratory case study of the public parks and recreation grant application process was designed to identify best practices and strategies that local governments can utilize to build their capacity to achieve grant success. Through the lens of a state funded, dollar for dollar matching grant program, the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF), we examined the challenges and opportunities local governments face when considering application for a grant.

The study utilized a mixed methods approach. First, we examined the past 25 years of PARTF grant data (from the State of North Carolina Treasurer's Office and NC Department of Natural Resources) at the county and municipal level to explore the influence of financial resources and constituent base on grant participation and success. We then conducted and qualitatively coded 13 semi-structured interviews with municipal (county and city) Parks and Recreation Directors and other key informants to understand the range of challenges that exist in navigating the grant application process and how those challenges might be negotiated.
In our quantitative analysis we found that, despite a widely held assumption that access to financial resources ultimately dictates grant success, agency budgets and constituent base (i.e., population size) were not major factors contributing to PARTF grant application participation or success. Interviews revealed two factors that were better indicators of success: organizational and community capacity. While interview respondents still admitted fiscal resources were important, they also identified multiple factors related to organizational capacity (e.g., human resources, planning resources, land availability) and community capacity (e.g., citizen

engagement, community buy-in, local government support, and partnerships and collaborations) as significant factors for grant participation and success. For example, engaging citizens in a recreation needs assessment can provide citizen-guided direction which local governments can align with their mission and organizational objectives. Local governments lacking critical financial or human resources can then leverage partnerships and collaborations with other agencies or sectors to overcome deficits and achieve programmatic goals. Elaborating on these themes provides beneficial insight for other municipal governments looking to transform their communities through expanded parks, recreation and leisure offerings. Lessons learned from the PARTF process could be applied to other states or government programs that rely on similar grants and alternative funding sources, ultimately helping diverse agencies finds ways to achieve grant success.

Building Capacity for Grant Success: Insights from Local Parks and Recreation Agencies in North Carolina

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management

Raleigh, North Carolina

2019

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BIOGRAPHY

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1.1. Introduction

Leisure opportunities offered through local parks and recreation providers provide a variety of benefits that promote health and well-being (Bedimo, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005; Tinsley & Tinsley, 1986; Baldwin & Tinsley, 1988; Haworth, 2003; Unger & Kernan, 1983; Baker & Palmer, 2006; Larson, Jennings, & Cloutier, 2016). Fiscally, local parks and recreation agencies typically achieve the goal of providing a higher quality of life to citizens primarily through general funds and appropriations set forth by the local government (Gladwell, Anderson, & Sellers, 2003; Mowen, Kyle, et. al., 2006). On average, 76% of park operating budgets come from these local funds and appropriations (Walls, 2009). Although local government funding allocated to parks and recreation has remained relatively constant in the last half a century, per capita funding levels are effectively reduced considering concurrent population growth (Sprangler & Caldwell, 2007). Adequate places to engage in physical activity, for example, can highlight issues addressing the built environment of a community.

The number of parks and recreation facilities in a community corresponds with increased physical activity (Li, et. al., 2005; Rosenberger, R. et al. (2005). While public parks and recreation services are available in both rural and suburban areas, distribution is not equitable (Parks and Recreation in Underserved Areas, 2012). While research suggests no significant difference in pay-per-use recreational facilities for low, medium and high socio-economic status (SES) communities, there are fewer publically-provided resources for leisure in low and medium SES communities when compared to high SES communities (Estabrooks, Lee, & Gyurcsik, 2003). Addressing these gaps in service equitably throughout a community can be straining to a local government lacking adequate funding. Parks and recreation agencies have therefore grown accustomed to serving expanding populations with narrowing resources (Walls, 2009). Adequately funding local parks is one of the top challenges for growth and sustainability of a parks system, suggesting a need for supplemental funding sources as tax generated appropriations decline or stagnate (Mowen, Gerard, William & Graefe, 2006; Mowen, Kyle, et. al., 2006; Crompton, 2009).

To provide engaging leisure opportunities, local parks can no longer rely solely on local government funds and appropriations generated by taxes to serve their citizens. Other funding mechanisms exist which influence financing and operational success, such as: user fees, entrance

fees, programming, non-profit partnerships, corporate sponsorships, donations, and grants (Mowen, Kyle, et. al., 2006; Walls, 2009). Of these supplemental funding sources, state and federal grants provide a unique opportunity for local parks and recreation to develop new projects, acquire additional parkland, and enhance recreation opportunities and quality of life across diverse communities. State and federal grants are unique because there is typically no additional cost to the public, as grants take existing local funds and maximize them often through a fiscal matching structure. State and federal grants typically represent higher fiscal awards than other alternative funding streams like donations, sponsorships, and Friends Group support, allowing for the pursuit of large capital projects and land acquisitions that would otherwise be unfeasible. Investment from state and federal entities are critical to create new opportunities for disadvantaged communities (CMAP, 2017). For example, the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grants have provided North Carolina parks and recreation entities over $180 million for park development and land acquisition in the past 20 years (PARTF, 2016a).

Grant applications require a level of capacity which includes internal controls, ability to navigate the pre-award process, performance measures, managing performance, and assessing results (Guide to opportunities for improving grant accountability,) However, for many smaller localities, the positive outputs that grants produce are not yet realized or feasibly achievable, as many of these agencies operate with limited staff and funds, or may not have the knowledge, training, or technical resources to achieve goals to improve the quality of life of their citizens (Plumer & Heymans, 2013). Disadvantaged local governments struggle to implement change in disinvested communities because of a lack in capacity. Furthermore, the local governments that could most benefit from capacity building and collaborative, intra-jurisdictional activities, engage in them the least (Plumer & Heymans, 2003; CMAP, 2017). Rural communities in particular, even those of size and substance, are struggling under the burden of increasing need and responsibilities in an era of limited financial and human resources (Letherman & Deller, 2001). Consequently, capacity is often lacking in rural or small communities (McGuire et. al., 1994).

Capacity building efforts are broad and multi-faceted, and range from ensuring sustainable funding to enhancing technical knowledge, to networking and creating partnerships to encourage shared resources. Yet capacity factors exist on a spectrum for local governments, and will inherently differ from one community to the next (CMAP, 2017). Many of the reasons

for a local government's lack of capacity is a result of insufficient fiscal conditions and increasingly constrained resources (CMAP, 2017). In the context of local parks and recreation, appropriations are secondary to primary public services such as police and utilities, and this dynamic is exacerbated in poorer areas that spend more on providing public services, yet have lower fiscal capacities and higher uncompensated costs (Joassart-Morcelli, Musso, & Wolch, 2005; Walls, 2009). Other local government units such as school districts and planning commissions also face similar challenges (Stringer, 2003; CMAP, 2017).

Communities pursuing local, often competing, goals can do so through bolstering their municipal capacity. In this study, we conceptualize municipal capacity as an overarching construct that includes aspects of organizational and community capacity; it can be defined as 'the ability of a municipality to ensure services are provided on a sustained basis in pursuit of local and regional objectives' (CMAP, p.6, 2017). In this context, organizational and community capacity are closely linked because the action to improve communities occurs in, and through, organizations (Evans, Raymond & Perkins, 200).

This study is not framed prescriptively; it does not suggest that challenges and opportunities in pursuing alternative funding sources are synonymous across diverse local governments. Instead, it presents evidence of, and tools for, developing municipal capacity in different contexts. Each community and corresponding local government is unique, and so should be their approach to developing municipal capacity to achieve community and organizational goals. For example, smaller local governments can maintain a higher municipal capacity than larger ones by managing their assets, resources, and partnerships effectively. The inverse may also be true. Each local government has unique challenges and opportunities. Yet, despite the inherent diversity across multiple government entities, this case study uncovers common threads that can potentially transcend context and scope.

As evidenced through interviews, professional communications and existing literature, practitioners often assume capacity for grant success is about the money, even when research often suggests it is not (Edwards, Jilcott, Floyd, Moore, 2001; Jilcott, Edwards, Moore, Shores, et al, 2013; Dutton, Worrell, Terrell, et. al, 2012; Orfield, Lipson, & Hoag, 2015; Wenner, Jacobs, Wilson, & Newberry, 2006; Wells, Meede, Anderson, et. al., 2016). This study aims to address if these assertions are really true when it comes to grant success, which is something that has not been adequately explored in the parks and recreation field. Perhaps more importantly, if

it is indeed true, is the ability to clearly communicate to practitioners the message that grant success is rooted in establishing and enhancing organizational and community capacity, not necessarily fiscal resources (Pederson, Held, Brown, 2016). Furthermore, we aim to explore how participation in grant programs can aid in developing and maintaining municipal capacity (Wells, Meede, Anderson, et. al., 2016; Wenner, Jacobs, Wilson, & Newberry, 2006), and in doing so can increase odds of agency grant success in the future (Eloy, Svider & Kanumuri, 2014).

Study Purpose and Objectives:

This study aims to identify elements of municipal capacity that influence local governments' ability to successfully negotiate the grant application process. The North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant will be used as a case study to address the following research objectives:

1. *Investigate the influence financial resources (e.g., agency budgets) and constituent base (or population) size have on grant application and success.* This will allow us to test the common assumption among practitioners that financial resources always equate to capacity when it comes to grant success. For example, anecdotal evidence from a survey or park and rec directors in NC suggest that 75% claim that lack of funding and financial limitations is the main obstacle to grant applications (unpublished data). This will be done through quantitative analysis of existing datasets.
2. *Identify barriers to grant success (specifically focusing on those that are not financial in nature, given results of objective 1).* If barriers to grant success are not just about size and money, what other challenges come into play? This will be investigated through a qualitative analysis of interview data.
3. *Identify strategies for enhancing both organizational and community capacity to achieve grant success.* This will be achieved through a qualitative analysis of interview data.

1.2. Literature Review:

1.2.1. Parks benefit local communities

Recreation participation and access to green space have positive directly and indirect effects on quality of life (Baker and Palmer, 2006; Godbey and Mowen, 2010; Brown, Schebella, Weber, 2014; Jennings, Larson & Yun, 2016). Parks and recreation facilities provide the opportunity for recreation, leisure and community involvement. Specifically, local parks and recreation agencies provide these services to their immediate local population. Seventy percent

of Americans make use of local parks and recreation each year (Mowen, Graefe, et. al, 2016). Studies have shown there is a direct relationship between park visitation and physical activity within the park, resulting in outcomes of physical health benefits, psychological health benefits and social benefits (Bedimo, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005; Cohen, McKenzie, Sehgal, Williamson, Golinelli, & Lurie, 2007; Liu and Zhang, 2017). Access and proximity to local parks are of key importance, as park visitation decreases as proximity to a local park increases (Cohen, McKenzie, Sehgal, et. al, 2007). Furthermore, negative health outcomes such as obesity and heart disease decrease with closer proximity to urban parks and recreational resources (Calle and Kaaks, 2004; Wolch, Jarrett, et. al, 2011; Bruton, Floyd, Bocarro, Henderson, Casper, Kanters, 2011; West, Shores, & Mudd, 2012).

By providing ecosystem services, parks and green space also contribute to urban health in other ways. For example, urban green space helps improve air quality and mitigate water pollution, enhance recreational and cultural opportunities, and increase aesthetics and property values (Nowak and McPherson, 1993; Wakefield, Elliott, Cole, & Eyles, 2001; Crompton, 2001; Daniel, Muhar, Arnberger, Aznaar, et. al., 2012). Many argue that investing in parks, recreation facilities, trails, and greenways is synonymous with investing in the public health of community citizens (Bedimo, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005; Librett, Henderson, Godbey & Morrow, 2007; Shultz, Layton, Edwards, et al., 2016). Parks represent critically important public resources that are widely supported by the American public (NRPA, 2016). Declining federal support for public parks and recreation, coupled with inadequate local funding, therefore magnifies the importance of parks and recreation agency's capacity to sustain high quality service provision by successfully negotiate the grant application process.

1.2.2 The need for alternative funding sources for local government

Historically, public parks and recreation has been funded by local appropriations generated by citizen taxes (Gladwell, Anderson, & Sellers, 2003; Mowen, Kyle, et. al., 2006). Over the past few decades, parks and recreation services, as a percentage of all local government appropriations, have remained constant, while federal spending for recreation and parks has decreased (Crompton, McGregor, 2003; Godbey, Caldwell, Floyd et al., 2005). Stagnant local appropriations, rising populations, and declining federal fiscal support has effectively reduced local parks and recreation funding (Kacznynski and Crompton, 2006). Additionally, incremental budgeting results in a lack of new positions, forcing public parks and recreation to spread

resources when attempting to implement new programs and facilities (Kacznynski and Crompton, 2006). Local parks and recreation agencies charged with serving expanding populations with limited resources and staffing have therefore recently turned to revenue and operational alternatives in an effort to maintain adequate facilities, programs, and parkland (Walls, 2009).

1.2.3. Alternative funding sources exist for local governments

Local parks and recreation agencies must explore creative alternatives in procuring funding to adequately address community needs and promote quality of life. Public parks and recreation have mirrored fiscal conservatism, becoming more market driven and entrepreneurial with fees and charges administered to constituents to offset the stagnant tax-supported revenues (Crompton and Kacznynski, 2003; Crompton, 1999; Walls, 2009; Godbey, G., Caldwell, et. al., 2005). One such funding strategy for parks and recreation services is through **internal revenue generation**, such as park entrance fees and participatory user fees, which may counter the conceptual framework of local parks and recreation as a pure public good (Dustin, More, & McAvoy, 2000). Nominal user fees have been found to have a minimal effect on overall visitation, yet have disproportionate effects on historically marginalized groups who are less likely to pay for increased user fees (Larson, Whiting, Green & Bowker, 2012). Glover (1999) posits this focus on revenue generation may deter participation in a recreation and leisure setting. Furthermore, privatization of public leisure services as a commodity may negatively influence the socioeconomic disparity that already exists, and threaten the fundamental goal of parks and recreation--providing equitable leisure services that stimulate quality of life and well-being (Crompton and Lamb, 1986; Glover, 1999). Another form of public parks and recreation privatization is **corporate sponsorship**, which provides benefits and risks for public-sector parks and recreation. Similar to other private-public relationships, there is an expectation that both entities will become more profitable or well recognized; a relationship that cannot be guaranteed (Pitas, et. al., 2015). Additionally, privatization of local parks and recreation may lead to inequitable levels of service within a given jurisdiction or municipality (Green, 2002).

Incorporating **nonprofit organizations** into operations and financing, such as “friends of the park” groups, conservancies and foundations, may garner more local support, and many local parks and recreation agencies have recently turned to this alternative funding strategy (Walls, 2009). Local nonprofits may be encouraged to invest in local park infrastructure while creating

and facilitating their own recreation activities and special events. While volunteerism can enhance programming, awareness, maintenance and financial support to local parks and recreation, the majority of local parks, especially in smaller towns or rural areas, do not have an affiliated active volunteer group or nonprofit organization (Holfield and Williams, 2013). Furthermore, these smaller communities may not have the population base or capacity to develop such a volunteer base.

Private giving is often the impetus for large park projects, such as Chicago's $500 million Millennium Park. Private donors and corporate sponsorships covered nearly half of the project cost for this iconic park (Walls, 2014). Planned giving may prevent budget crisis, and improve financial stability for public parks and recreation (Wright, 1991). However, because private giving caters to selectiveness per its donors, equitability is an inherent issue. Furthermore, private giving may contribute to declining public appropriations, as local governments perceive false expectations of potential funding streams (Powell, 2013).

Bond referendums have the potential to provide substantial support to local parks and recreation, but must first make it to ballot and then have majority citizen support in order to pass the initiative. For example, in 2016 Fayetteville, North Carolina, voters easily passed a $35 million bond issue for parks and recreation projects, but only after numerous stalls in city council and being voted down twice in the past 20 years. In some cases, bonds fill the voids left by inadequate annual funding. This was the case with California's Proposition 12 Park Bond Act in 2000, which at the time was the largest environmental and conservation bond referendum to ever pass in the nation's history. Proposition 12 provided $545 million for state parks, $827 million for local parks and recreation areas, and $266 million to wetlands and habitat restoration, designating a large portion thereof for differed maintenance. There is a growing support for these bond measures, as indicated by the 81 percent average approval rate of bond issues for land conservation in local elections as tracked by the Trust for Public Land in 2012 (Dolesh, 2012) Bond referendums are often the impetus for reoccurring grants in a given sector.

Federal Grants also provide the funding stream for land acquisitions and capital expenditures that stimulate continued growth and development in local parks and recreation that would otherwise be unfeasible, (Godbey, G., Caldwell, et. al., 2005; Wells, 2009). Enterprising parks and recreation agencies may find supplemental support to local government appropriations through federal grants. However, federal support to local parks and recreation has been

declining, as is the case with The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), which has seen sharp appropriation cuts since its inauguration in 1965. Federal policies, like LWCF, have been the primary source of grant funding for parkland acquisition and development. LWCF funding is distributed to states by condition of need, as evaluated through the Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plans, a portion of which is allocated to local parks and recreation, as determined by state agencies (Godbey, Caldwell, et. al., 2005). For example, LWCF has provided the state of North Carolina approximately $216 million over the past five decades (LWCF in your state, 2016). Historically, North Carolina's LWCF annual allocation is split 60/40 between local governments and state agencies (LWCF in your state, 2016). Therefore, the reduction of federal funding, similar to LWCF, significantly influences local parks and recreation agency's ability to vie and compete for affiliated grants.

Exclusive reliance on federal programs entangled in policy priorities therefore results in unreliable returns, particularly when funds are outright eliminated, as has been proposed in recent years in regards to the LWCF (Spangler & Caldwell, 2007). Federal funding streams to local parks and recreation delivered from various federal agencies exist so long as policy prioritizes such. In cases where support wanes, state grants may be a critical alternative.

An important complement to federal grant opportunities for local parks and recreation are **state funded grants,** which exist in states that have prioritized supplemental funding for parks, recreation and natural spaces. North Carolina, for example, manages the **Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF),** administered by the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, which provides dollar for dollar matching grants to North Carolina local governments for parks and recreation projects. PARTF acts as the primary source of funding for construction and renovation of new facilities, as well as land acquisition for existing parks (Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, 2016a).

Although the aforementioned trust fund, and its corresponding grant distributions, is specific to North Carolina, the model of grant allocation to parks and recreation financed by a pre-established state managed trust fund is a commonality found throughout the United States. For example, the Florida Communities Trust assists communities in protecting and preserving important natural resources, while providing recreational opportunities. This trust is comprised of, among other components, the Parks and Open Space *Florida Forever Program* grant program. The Parks and Open Space *Florida Forever* grant program protects the state's natural,

cultural, and ecological resources through its dynamic conservation and recreation lands acquisition program, which encourages nature-based tourism, promotes community revitalization and economic growth, and positions Florida citizens for a higher quality of life. Similar to PARTF, Florida Communities Trust Open Space *Florida Forever* Program is a state land acquisition grant program that provides funding to local governments for acquisition of community-based parks, open-space, and greenways. Since its inception in 2001, has preserved 92,400 acres of land by providing $839 million for land acquisition, and has seen local government matches of more than $721 million (Florida Communities Trust, 2017).

In another example, the California Department of Parks and Recreation provides approximately $10 million each year through the Outdoor Environmental Education Facilities Grant Program, which helps fund the development of public outdoor structures and exhibits that facilitate Outdoor Environmental Education (Outdoor Environmental Education Facilities Grant Program, 2017). In Tennessee, The Local Parks and Recreation Fund (LPRF) provides grants to eligible local governments for the purchase of lands for parks, natural areas, greenways, and recreational facilities (Local Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, 2017). Other examples abound.

State grants, like the ones mentioned, are typically advantageous because they provide the capital for new recreation and leisure facilities, renovations to existing facilities, and parkland acquisition for both small and large parks. Creation of new public park facilities provides flexibility for park users. For example, pocket parks are small urban parks converted from unused areas or abandoned spaces that have helped fill recreation, leisure, and green space needs in metropolitan areas. Physical activity levels of communities increase when pocket parks are constructed (Cohen, Marsh, & Williamson, 2014). Pocket parks are perceived by citizens as a positive community amenity and foster community interaction (Gibson, Canfield, 2016). The construction of larger public parks and recreation facilities provide similar community benefits on a more encompassing scale. State grants provide localities the opportunity to create, and maintain, parks of varying sizes based on community need.

Renovations to park facilities has been found to significantly increase usage and physical activity within community parks, while also increasing the perception of safety (Tester & Baker, 2009; Cohen, Han, Isacoff, et. al., 2015; King, Litt, et al., 2015). Perceived accessibility to parks and trails is positively associated with physical activity (Brownson, Baker, et. al., 2001). Additionally, the number of recreation facilities nearby has been linked to socioeconomic status

and physical activity; areas with higher socioeconomic status and increased physical activity have greater odds of having more than one recreation facility nearby. Conversely, areas with lower socioeconomic status or minority groups have higher odds of having one or less recreation facilities nearby, and correspondingly lower levels of physical activity (Gorden-Larsen, Nelson, Page, et. al, 2006).

Allocation and distribution of funds for parks and recreation facilities has become increasingly important for agencies aiming to address community needs equitably. Crompton and Lamb (1986) differentiate equitable allocation and distribution: allocation addresses "Who gets what?" while distribution deals with the "When, where, and how?" Localities compete with other local governments for allocation of state and federal resources, while public services of those localities dictate resource distribution (West and Crompton, 2013). This competition for additional resources to localities can fuel disparities in access to leisure facilities and programs (Kacznynski and Crompton, 2006; Barrett, A. Pitas, N., & Mowen, A., 2017). State grants provide an opportunity to help compress this inequity in accessibility to park and recreation facilities. Despite increasing awareness of the benefits of parks and the importance of external grants in funding them, few local agencies have the resources or the capacity to successfully navigate the grant acquisition process. It is therefore important to explore the factors that lead to grant success.

1.2.4. Challenges local governments face in the grant application process

While the number of federal grant opportunities to municipalities has increased greatly since the 1960's, some of those programs appear to favor large, established and well connected governments (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1979). And while grant opportunities have increased for local governments, competition for state and federal resources has exploded in recent years (Pflumm, 2011). For example, agency wide funding rates for the National Science Foundation (NSF) in the years 2010-2013 was only 22-24%, and the majority of the applications submitted to NSF each year are considered meritorious, meaning they meet requested criteria (National Science Foundation, 2014; National Science Board, 2013). With these high competition and low funding rates, one can understand why a potential grant applicant would want to weigh the opportunity cost of applying for a grant before pursuing it.

Other barriers to grant success cited in literature include workload, administrative duties, institutional capacity and institutional structures of support, availability of grant writers,

changing administration, and post-award support (Pinto, Huizinga, 2018). Other literature cites inadequate infrastructure, training and development, inadequate mentoring, insensitivity or miscommunication about specific needs, institutional bias, an unfair competitive environment, a lack of institutional support and social, and cultural and environmental barriers as the main challenges facing potential grant applicants (Shivers, et al, 2005).

Capacity drivers cited in literature to help overcome these barriers include prior experience, developing human resources, a common desire to seek funding, existence of collaborators, and knowing the audience/funders (Pinto, Huizinga, 2018). The ability of a local government to contract out services is also important for creating or aiding in planning resources, however small or rural local governments may not have the fiscal resources to pursue this type of assistance (Collins, 2016). In short, there are many barriers to grant success across multiple sectors. In many cases, and particularly in the local government context, these barriers can be addressed by enhancing capacity.

1.2.5. The need to develop municipal capacity

Considering that a large number of local governments do not apply for grants such as PARTF regularly, or at all, concerns arise that some communities are not adequately developing parks and recreation or not adequately equipped to do so. Because there is an undeniable need for additional resources in public parks and recreation, public parks and recreation agencies should pursue additional resources to aid in operations and programming when available. If resources are available, but not pursued, allocated, or effectively utilized, *a potential gap in capacity* may exist.

To understand the role capacity has in local government, we must first understand the general concepts of capacity and capacity building. Capacity must be defined in relation to its application (Bowman & Kearney, 1988). Nair (2003) presents an international definition for ***capacity*** as the ability of individuals, organizations, and whole societies to define and solve problems, make informed choices, order their priorities and plan their futures, as well as implement programs and projects to sustain them. While broad in scope, dynamic and multidimensional, building capacity attempts to address management issues such as financial management, organizational development, grantsmanship, and service integration in relevant fields such as economics, public administration, manufacturing, non-profit service, and operations (Brown, LaFound & Macintyre, 2001; Cohen, 1995; Honadle, 2017).

Capacity as an umbrella term is the ability to perform a specific task or generate a particular output (Bowman & Kearney, 1988). Because capacity must be defined in relation to its application (Bowman & Kearney, 1988), for this study we can understand a local government's ability to perform specific tasks or generate particular outputs as **municipal capacity** (Gargan, 1981). As with any distribution of governmental funds, there are numerous variables involved with grant allocations for state and federally subsidized parks and recreation grants. Local governments have varying capabilities when it comes to the delivery of public service, and some are inherently more capable than others (Gargan, 1981). Therefore, each local government will have various levels of municipal capacity based on factors that will soon be elaborated on. *The ability of a local government to successfully navigate a grant process is closely aligned with its municipal capacity.* We define municipal capacity for applicability to this study and its participants as, "the ability of a municipality to ensure services are provided on a sustained basis in pursuit of local and regional objectives" (Municipal capacity, p.6, 2017). In the public sector, organizational capacity and community capacity play mutually important roles as the core components of municipal capacity.

Understanding municipal capacity

Municipal capacity includes elements of environmental regulations (Wieland, 1998), trust in government (Denhardt, 2002), civic capacity (Hall, 2002), indirect government (Gazley & Brundey, 2005) and state fiscal assistance (Hou, Moynihan, & Ingraham, 2003; Hall, 2008; Hedge, 1983). While capacity building for agency goals including grant development is well studied in the nonprofit (Riverbank & Mentor, 2014; Sobeck, 2008; Minzner, Klerman, Markovitz, et al, 2013; Pettijohn, 2013) and public administration fields (Hall, 2008; McGuire & Silva, 2010; Honadle, 1981), there is a need in the parks and recreation field for empirical evidence of capacity building strategies which can be utilized to achieve agency goals such as navigating the grant application process (Edwards, 2015).

In the context of this study, we examine the municipal capacity factors that influence a local government's ability to apply for a grant. Specifically, we investigate organizational and community capacity as the foundation of municipal capacity. This includes internal factors such as staffing and spending as well as external factors like social, political, and economic factors of the particular community (Bowman & Kearney, 1988; Gargan, 1981; Putnam, Leonardi, Nanetti, & Pavoncello, 1983). Both organizational and community capacity include aspects of these

internal and external factors, and are the essential building blocks of developing municipal capacity (Fig. 1).

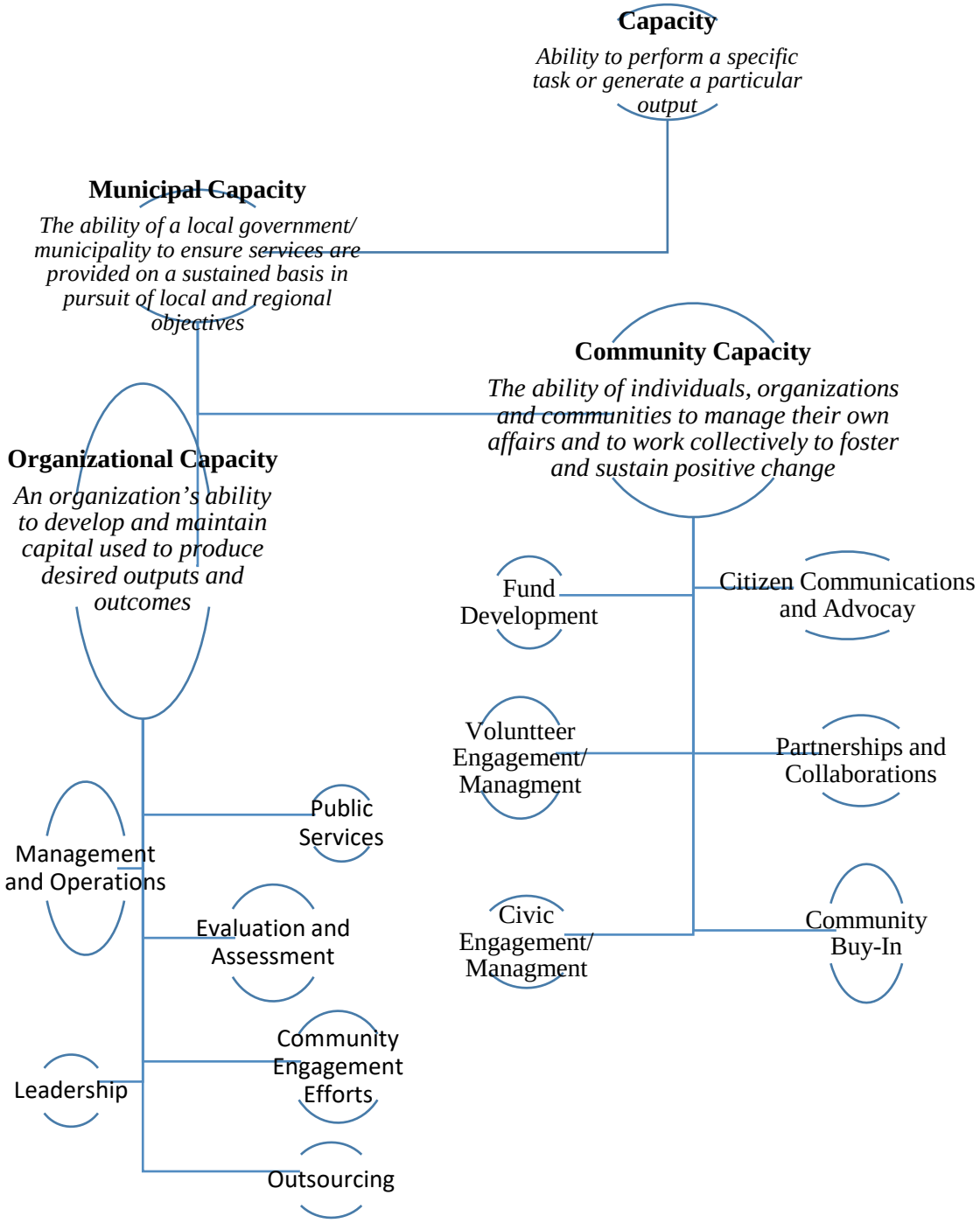

Figure 1: Understanding municipal capacity: A concept map. This figure expresses a way to understand capacity in the context of parks and recreation agencies. Organizational and community capacity are the two fundamental components of municipal capacity.

Organizational and community capacity are essential components of municipal capacity. For the purpose of this study, we will define ***organizational capacity*** as an organization's ability to develop and maintain capital used to produce desired outputs and outcomes, encompassing four main components: external factors (e.g., funding, legal frameworks), financial capacity, human resources capacity, and structural capacity (Hall, et. al., 2003). External factors of organizational capacity may include public policy, demographics, past behavior, access to resources, public support, and the physical environment (Hall, et. al., 2003). These external factors may constrain or help facilitate organizational effectiveness (Sharpe, 2006). For parks and recreation grant applicants, this could entail availability of land for development, previously awarded grants and the corresponding success in implementing them, or regulatory constraints on potential park developments.

The component of financial capacity may refer to expenses, revenues, assets, and liabilities (Hall, et. al., 2003). In the PARTF grant application, this component of organizational capacity can be viewed as an applicant's ability to match the project cost, or exceed their requested match. PARTF projects require localities to match their request for funds. Therefore, applicants with higher financial capacity can apply more often, and request higher volumes of matching funds.

Human resource capacity is the knowledge, competencies and skills of staff and volunteers (human capital), and the ability to effectively utilize them (Hall, et. al., 2003). Having sufficient staff to develop and submit a grant application in addition to standard operations is an example of how human capital can influence organizational capacity in the grant process.

Structural capacity includes elements of relationships and networks, infrastructure and process, and planning and development (Hall, et. al., 2003). Because grant proposals can require a myriad of invested parties such as landscape architects, advisory boards, contractors, consultants, and grant writers, having a diverse network with strong relationships can be beneficial in navigating the grant application process. Furthermore, Golden (2001) ascertains that when one desires a grant, the first thing to do is to begin a dialogue with the grant maker, which is arguably more important than the quality of the proposal or application itself. Planning and development focuses on strategic plans, designs and proposals (Hall, et. al., 2003). For public parks and recreation, this could include strategic master plans, countywide plans, and grant proposals.

Other literature frames these themes of organizational capacity similarly (Figure 1): management and operations, public services, leadership, community engagement efforts, and evaluative capacity (Organizational capacity assessment tool, 2017). Within each one of these subthemes, exists an opportunity to enhance capacity. For example, leadership capacity includes an organization's sense of purpose and direction, and includes vision and mission, leadership and governance, strategy and planning, and culture and values (McKinney & Company, 2001; Liket & Mass, 2015; Bryson, Gibbons & Shaye, 2001; Paynter & Berner, 2014). Management and operations capacity, meanwhile, includes financial management (Faynter & Berner, 2014), human resources, and infrastructure and technology (Hall, et. al, 2003).

Strong and effective organizations can play an important role in building and enhancing capacity in their locality through a "technical assistance" approach (Evans, Raymond, Perkins, 2009; Cavaye & Ross 2019) In this manner, local governments utilize their efforts to bolster organizational capacity as a stimuli for community capacity efforts. The community can in turn help to further develop the organizational capacity of the institution, which in this case is their local government.

Community capacity. Key domains of community capacity (Figure 1) include fund development (Hall, et at, 2003; Misener & Doherty, 2009; Schuh & Leviton, 2006), communications and advocacy (Liket & Mass, 2015; Grantmakers for effective organizations, 2016), volunteer/civic engagement and management (Paynter & Berner, 2014), community buy-in, and community partnerships and collaboration (Grantmakers for effective organizations, 2016). Other recent literature categorizes the key principles of community capacity similarly, such as: enhancing service delivery (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Barzelay, 1992), creating a vehicle for existing concerns (Cavaye, 1997; Putnam, 1993), relationships and the role of pulic servants (Cavaye, 1997), learning (Marston, 1993), and the expressive role of ideas and values positioned by the local government (Moore, 1998; Ingram & Schneider, 1993).

Community capacity is also a concept synonymous with community development (Craig, 2007). Community capacity may refer to the ability of individuals, organizations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive change (Howe & Cleary, 2001). Community development refers to relationship building, that is, between people, organizations, and their social networks (Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Chaskin (2001) defines community capacity as "the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and

social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of a given community; it may operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort." Building community capacity describes an increase in a community's ability to define, assess and act on concerns of importance to community constituents (Jackson, et. al, 1999). Previous research has highlighted the benefits that parks, recreation, and sport have on community development and capacity building (Matarrita-Cascante & Edwards, 2016; Edwards, 2015; Misener & Doherty, 2009).

For the purpose of this paper, we conceptualized community capacity *as the factors upon which local communities can mitigate social and fiscal constraints and in turn implement positive change*. Members of a community define the range of goods and services they expect their local government to provide, which establishes baseline standards to which to a community can collectively work to improve (Chaskin, 1997; Sampson, 1999). This community structure and support can influence federal or other funding allocations to the local level (Luloff and Wilkinson, 1979). From a community capacity building perspective, communities are: "places (the physical environment), targets (the standard norms and beliefs), and forces (the energy and relationships the community uses to mobilize support) for change" (Community capacity building, 2014, p.16).

Contextualizing community capacity in the grant application process for local governments can include informal and organized efforts. Elements of informal community capacity may include public/stakeholder support (attitude), as well as existing community networks (e.g., active civic groups) that may stimulate positive growth for parks and recreation. These relationships are often characterized by mutual exchanges, trust, and responsibility (Community capacity building, 2014). Formal systems of community capacity are "the public and private agencies and organizations that provide services and support to communities" (Community capacity building, 2014, p.18). These more organized efforts of community capacity in the context of local parks and recreation may include engagement with and endorsement from key community leaders (e.g., elected officials), a conducted parks and recreation citizen needs assessment, as well as locally endorsed organizations that speak formally on behalf of the community's interest for parks and recreation (e.g., parks and recreation advisory board; land trusts).

1.2.6. Municipal capacity encourages agency goals including grant application and success

Transforming local governments to be more responsive can be a challenge for municipalities (Heymans & Plummer, 2013). However, studies have shown that local governments that are more assertive in seeking state funds (eg, PARTF), enjoy greater community and political support, and are more likely to attain the outcomes (eg, fiscal resources or technical assistance) they desire from the state legislature (Hedge, 1983). Therefore, an impetus should be placed on transforming local governments to be more assertive in seeking alternative funding. While assertiveness is important, building the capacity to act on those assertions is what is truly what is important in the grant application process. Studies affirm that intergovernmental grant funding (like PARTF) is "a crucial revenue source for local governments (Congressional Budget Office, 2013; Gordon, 2011), but some local governments have more capacity to attract than others. The localities with more capacity to obtain grant funding are those with more fiscal, administrative, and political resources to use for grant getting" (Sprague, Wilson & Cain, 2018).

Developing and enhancing municipal capacity, including organizational and community capacity, may be one of the most effective ways for local governments to position themselves for alternative funding opportunities, like the ability to apply, receive, and implement state grant awards (Heymans & Plummer, 2013). The largest challenge in this grant application process is not always willingness to engage, as we have seen participation in grant programs like PARTF is only increasing (Roberts, 2008; PARTF, 2019). Instead the core challenge here is helping practitioners understand that municipal capacity involves a lot more than just financial resources.

1.3 Case Study: An analysis of local governments applying for PARTF Grants

This study utilizes the NC PARTF grant process as a case study, aimed at identifying factors that influence a local government's capacity to successfully negotiate the challenging grant application process. The mixed methods research consisted of two phases. The first phase (Chapter 2), focused on quantitative analysis of historical PARTF grant submission data to investigate the influence of financial resources (e.g., agency budgets) and constituent base (or population) size on grant applications and awards. This research setting is relevant to examine because all local governments in North Carolina are eligible to apply for the PARTF grant, creating the opportunity to identify local governments that have, and have not, found grant success. Many grant applications are limited in scope of application to specific community

attributes, so a grant program (PARTF) with the size and scope allows for insight into the elements of capacity for grant application that are important universally across the state. Recommendations, therefore, can be applied to a diverse range of local governments.

The second phase (Chapter 3), focused on qualitative analysis of interviews conducted with local park and recreation agency key informants with varying degrees of participation and success with the PARTF process. This chapter addresses research objectives 2 and 3, which includes the challenges local governments face when applying for grants, and the tools for negotiating them. These interviews were designed to enhance understanding of the different organizational and community capacity-building factors that could ultimately lead to grant success.

Following a discussion of the study results, this thesis ends with a summary of key findings and a list of explicit recommendations for agency directors, grant administrators, and researchers hoping to better understand strategies for successfully navigating the grant process (Chapter 4).

Chapter 2: Quantitative Analysis

Research Objective 1: Investigate the influence financial resources and constituent base size have on grant application and success

2.1 Quantitative Methodology

This study was crafted in a way to assist understanding, and present resources, for local governments interested in pursuing the grant application process. While this topic has been studied before (Jilcott, Edwards, Moore, Shores, et al, 2013; Rosenberger, et al., 2005; Stringer, 2013; Pederson, Held & Brown, 2016), it is important to help practitioners understand how different factors might contribute to grant success. In the case of PARTF, for example, anecdotal evidence suggests a belief among practitioners that fiscal resources are essential for grant success. But is that really true?

Previous studies have shown that municipal attributes like population, total budget, and land mass are not significant indicators of the ability of a local government to meet citizen leisure needs (Edwards, Jilcott, Floyd, Moore, 2001; Jilcott, Edwards, Moore, Shores, et al, 2013). Furthermore, there is evidence that populations and local budgets are not significant indicators of state and federal grants (Dutton, Worrell, Terrell, et. al, 2012). However, other studies have linked financial capacity to grant success, while acknowledging rurality significantly increases grant funding per capita, while need has the opposite effect (Hall, 2010). In an effort to better understand this phenomenon in the context of this case study, we investigated if population and total municipal parks and recreation budget are significant indicators of grant participation and success. In the practitioner realm, local government leaders often chalk up the inability to apply for grants, or other sources of alternative funding, as a result of a lack in people (both staff and community) and/or money. In an effort to clearly communicate that this oft shared perspective may be ill-informed, we utilized two unique data sets from two secondary sources.

The first dataset, provided by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, included information about all past PARTF award applicants and all PARTF award recipients for the past 25 years. By cleaning this dataset, we were able to identify local and county governments that had never applied for a PARTF grant, those that had applied but never been awarded a PARTF grant, and those who were successful in their efforts of applying for a PARTF grant. These domains of grant success align with recent studies in other fields on the

propensity to apply and probability to succeed in the grant application process (Enger & Castellacci, 2016). Studies have shown that effort does indeed translate to success, and that those who write more grants tend to receive more funding (von Hippel & von Hippel, 2015). Consequently, 'Never applied' local governments are unique in this context, because they have not acted on the state grant opportunity available to them since the creation of the fund. Because very little literature has focused on local governments who never apply for grants, they represent an important piece of the puzzle—one that we can learn a lot from when it comes to understanding (lack of) capacity. Using these data sets, we were able to highlight the success rates of the PARTF applications submitted by county governments.

Research design

The first phase of this mixed methods research includes a quantitative analysis of county parks and recreation budget data transposed to understand if fiscal resources are a significant factor in grant application success. To explore factors associated with NC PARTF grant participation and success, we obtained data on past grant applications and awards from the year the PARTF grant was initiated, 1995, through 2016. These records are managed by the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, and include the years applied and years awarded for all 100 counties and 552 municipalities (the two government entities allowed to apply for PARTF grants) in the state. The spreadsheet also includes many other details about the applications and awards, including the requested match, the local governments financial obligation to the project, population, prosperity region, type of local government, and theme of application.

The second dataset utilized for this analysis was provided by the North Carolina Treasury Department, and details all capital and operating costs related to parks, recreation and open space expended by county governments in North Carolina. This database includes the financial information for all local governments with a functioning parks and recreation department. In North Carolina in 2018, there were 243 statewide Local Parks and Recreation Departments, 161 municipal, 76 county, and 6 combination (joint) operations (RRS Services Study, 2018; State Treasury, 2019).

Historical information (not used as a reference or tool for the quantitative analysis of this study) tracked, housed and published by the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (2017) program indicates that of the 652 local governments that are eligible to apply for PARTF,

191 had never applied for the PARTF grant (14 counties+187 municipalities). Therefore, roughly 71% of NC local governments have applied for the PARTF grant since 1995, of which ~10% have never been awarded (3 counties + 38 municipalities), and of which 37% achieve success less than 50% of the time (26 counties+143 municipalities)(PARTF, 2016). These statistics indicate that the application itself is not the primary barrier; instead it appears the primary challenge is the municipal capacity to successfully navigate the grant application process. It is important to note these statistics are dynamic with each year of trust fund existence, as first time applicants receive awards.

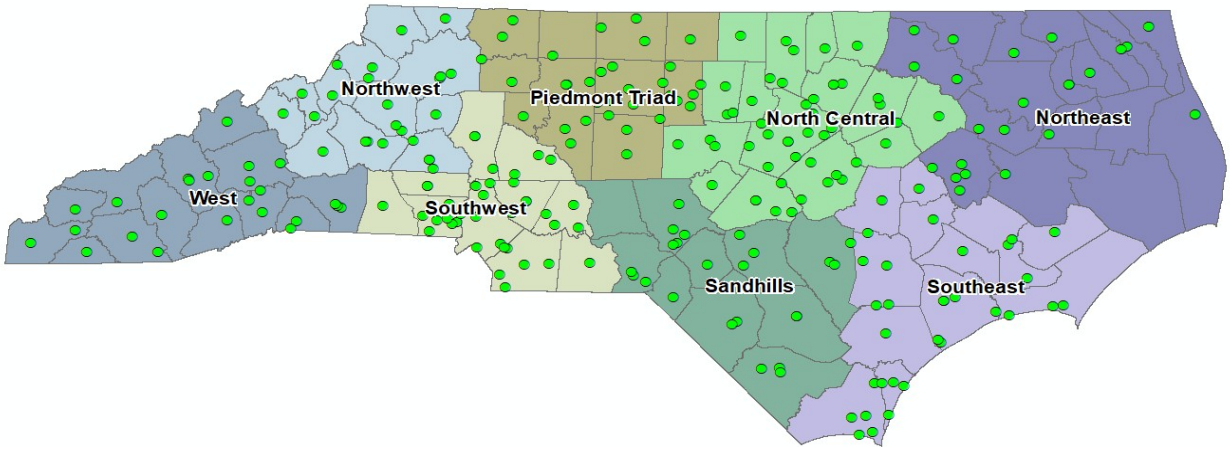

Figure 2: North Carolina Economic Prosperity Zones and public parks and recreation departments (RRS Services Study, 2019)

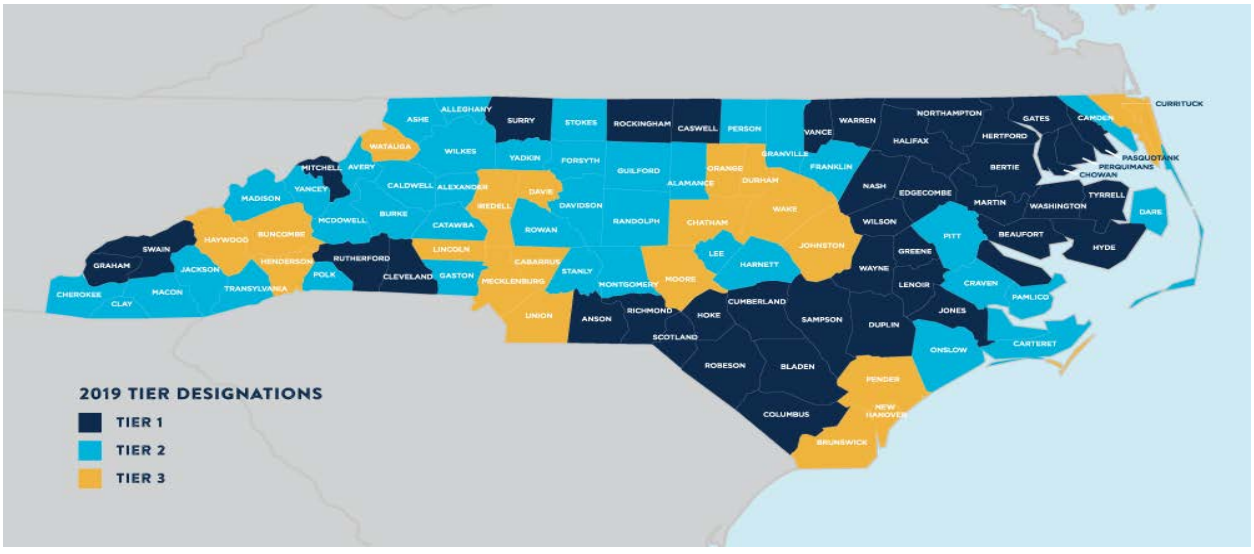

Figure 3: 2019 NC distress tier designations; Tier 1=40 most distressed counties, Tier 2=next 40 most distressed, Tier 3=20 least distressed (NC Department of Commerce, 2019)

Our analysis focused on two key dependent variables:

1) **Award Success** (whether county or municipality had received at least 1 PARTF grant award)

2) **Success Rate** (calculated by dividing the number of times an entity had won a PARTF award by the number of times they had applied)

To facilitate comparisons among different groups, we also developed the following success rate categories that could be applied to both counties and municipalities:

- Never awarded (tried but always failed)
- Never tried
- Always succeeded – one attempt (perfect on 1 attempt)
- Always succeeded – multiple attempts (perfect on more than 1 PARTF attempts)
- Less than 50% success rate – multiple tries
- More than 50% success rate – multiple tries

Because we were interested in links between financial capacity and grant success, our primary independent variables of interest were population size and budgets. Population size, often an effective proxy for financial management capacity (e.g., tax dollars used to support local governments) (Becker & Mulligan, 2003; Mills, Erickson, & Edwards, 2003; Simonsen, Robbins & Helgerson, 2002), was available for both counties and municipalities in the state from the fiscal year 2015-2016. In addition to the absolute population of each government entity, we also split counties into the following population groups, which align closely to the county and municipal categories that will be used for the 2020 census. For counties, a similar framing was used by merging the two lowest, two medium, and two highest categories of census grouping into three population groups that are reasonable for this study (NC Treasury, 2019).

- Under 25,000 people (n=26)
- 25,000-99,999 people (n=47)
- Over 100,000 people (n=27)

And municipalities into the following population groups:

- Under 1,000 people (n=219)
- 1,000-9,999 people (n=247)
- 10,000-49,999 people (n=68)
- Over 50,000 people (n=18)

This helped to facilitate comparisons among counties and municipalities of different size. Data regarding park and recreation budgets, including both operational and capital expenditures, was available for counties only, representing the fiscal year 2015-2016. This budget information provides a direct measure of the financial resources county governments have available to pursue park and recreation projects. In addition to the actual budget size of each county's annual parks and recreation budget, we also split counties into the following groups based on budget:

- No budget (n=19)
- Under $500,000 (n=30)
- $500,000 to $1,000,000 (n=23)
- Over $1,000,000 (n=28)

We used descriptive statistics to characterize PARTF participation and grant success across a wide range of government entities in NC. We then used chi-square analyses based on the categorical groupings noted above to test our hypothesis that population size and financial resources would be positive predictors of PARTF grant success.

2.2. Phase 1 Results

Results for counties:

We found that, of the 100 NC counties in our sample, 14% had never applied for a PART grant, and over 50% had applied three times or less from 1995-2016. Only three counties had applied 10 or more times.

Overall, 83% of counties had received at least one PARTF grant, but 21% had only received one; 7% of counties had received 5 or more. 69% of counties had submitted at least one PARTF grant application that was not awarded.

We observed a wide range of success rates in the PARTF grant process: 20% of counties had never failed in the PARTF application process (100% success rate), and 17% had never succeeded. The median success rate for counties was 60%. Counties split into the following groups based on success rate: never awarded (3%), never tried (14%), always succeeded – one attempt (10%), always succeeded – multiple attempts (10%), less than 50% success rate (26%), more than 50% success rate (37%).

Chi-square tests revealed significant differences in award success based on county population size, $\chi^2(2)=10.63$, $p=.005$, Cramer's V=.326. Contrary to our hypothesis, smaller counties were *more* likely to have received PARTF grant awards than larger counties. For

example, 92% of counties with less than 25,000 people had received at least on PARTF grant, that number dropped to 63% of counties with over 100,000 people.

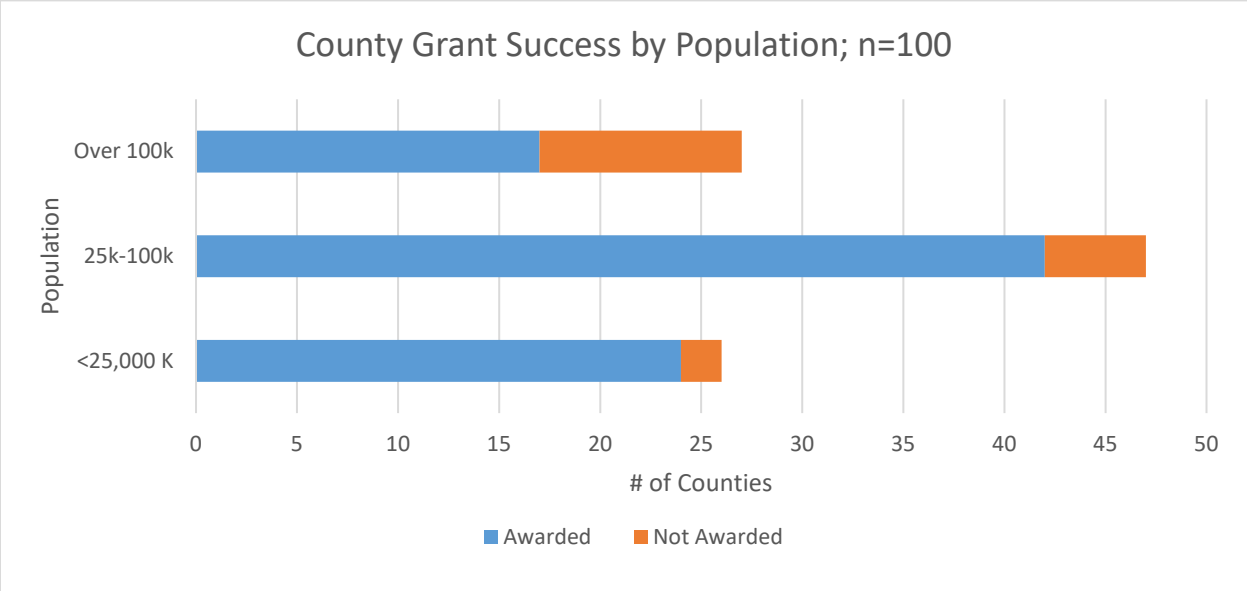

Figure 4: This figure represents PARTF grant success in relation to total county population. This expresses that smaller counties were more likely to have received a PARTF grant award; Chi-squared=10.63; p=.005; Cramer's V=.326

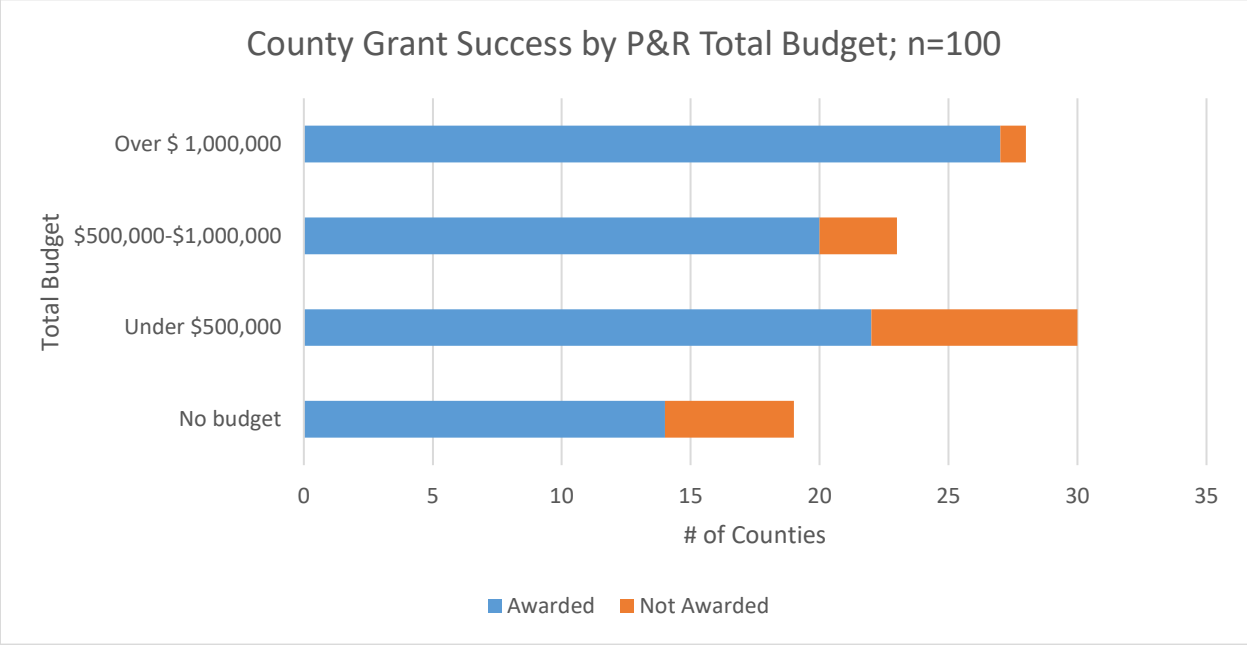

Figure 5: This figure expresses PARTF grant success in relation to total county parks and recreation budget. This figure expresses that total county P&R budget is not a significant indicator grant success; Chi-squared=6.99; p=.072, Cramer's V=.264

We did not find significant differences in the chi-square tests examining relationships between award success and parks and recreation budgets, $\chi^2(3)=6.99$, $p=.072$, Cramer's V=.264. However, 96% of counties with budgets over $1,000,000 had received at least one PARTF grant, whereas 74% of counties without a budget had received at least one.

Although the chi-square test comparing success rate categories and population groups was significant, $\chi^2(10)=23.47$, $p=.009$, Cramer's V=.343, clear patterns were hard to discern. If anything, smaller counties appeared to have greater success rates. For example, 19% of counties under 25,000 had always succeed on multiple tries, compared to just 11% of counties over 100,000. The proportion of small (35%), medium (40%) and large (33%) counties with grant success rates over 50% was similar. We did not observe any significant results when comparing the budget groups and success rate categories, $\chi^2(15)=19.81$, $p=.179$, Cramer's V=.257. These findings generally refute our hypothesis: neither population size nor budget seemed to be related to grant success.

Results for municipalities

When examining municipalities, we found that of the 552 NC cities and towns in our sample, 34% (n=188) had never applied for a PART grant, and 79% had applied three times or less. Only nine municipalities (1.6%) had applied 10 or more times.

Overall, 59% (n=325) of municipalities had received at least one PARTF grant, but 31% had only received one; 2% (n=12) of municipalities had received 5 or more. 44% of municipalities had submitted at least one PARTF grant application that was not awarded, including 4% who has submitted 5 or more applications that had not been awarded. Asheville was the most successful municipal government in the PARTF process, as they were the first to receive 12 unique PARTF grant awards from 1995-2016.

We again observed a wide range of success rates in the PARTF grant process: 22% of municipalities had never failed in the PARTF application process (100% success rate), and 41% had never succeeded. The median success rate for municipalities was 33%. Municipalities split into the following groups based on success rate: never awarded (7%), never tried (34%), always succeeded – one attempt (15%), always succeeded – multiple attempts (7%), less than 50% success rate (26%), more than 50% success rate (12%).

Chi-square tests revealed significant differences in award success based on municipal population size, $\chi^2(3)=94.37$, $p<.001$, Cramer's V=.413. Bigger cities were generally more likely

to have received PARTF grant awards than smaller cities and towns. For example, 95% of municipalities with more than 50,000 people had received at least on PARTF grant, but that number dropped to 35% of towns under 1,000 people (other success rates based on increasing population size were 71% and 84%, respectively). These data appear to suggest that size does matter for municipalities when it comes to grant success.

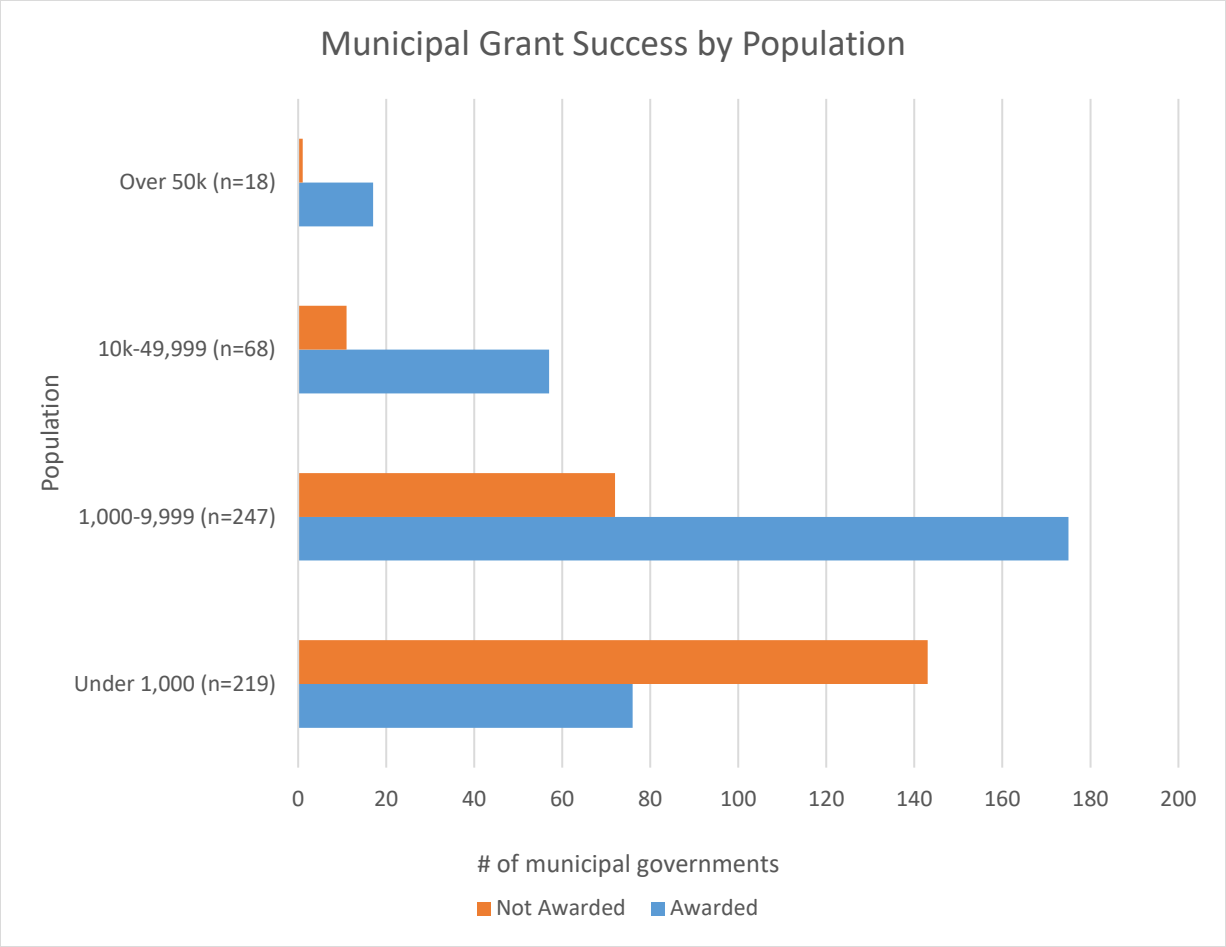

Figure 6: This figure expresses PARTF grant success in relation to total municipal population. This figure expresses that total county P&R budget is not a significant indicator grant success; Chi-squared=6.99; p=.072, Cramer's V=.264

The chi-square test comparing success rate categories and population groups was also significant, $\chi^2(15)=179.23$, $p<.001$, Cramer's V=.329. However, this is primarily because most small towns (60%) had never tried for a PARTF grant (compared to 20% or less in each of the other population categories). When focusing on the success rates of municipalities in other population categories, differences were far less pronounced (Figure 6).

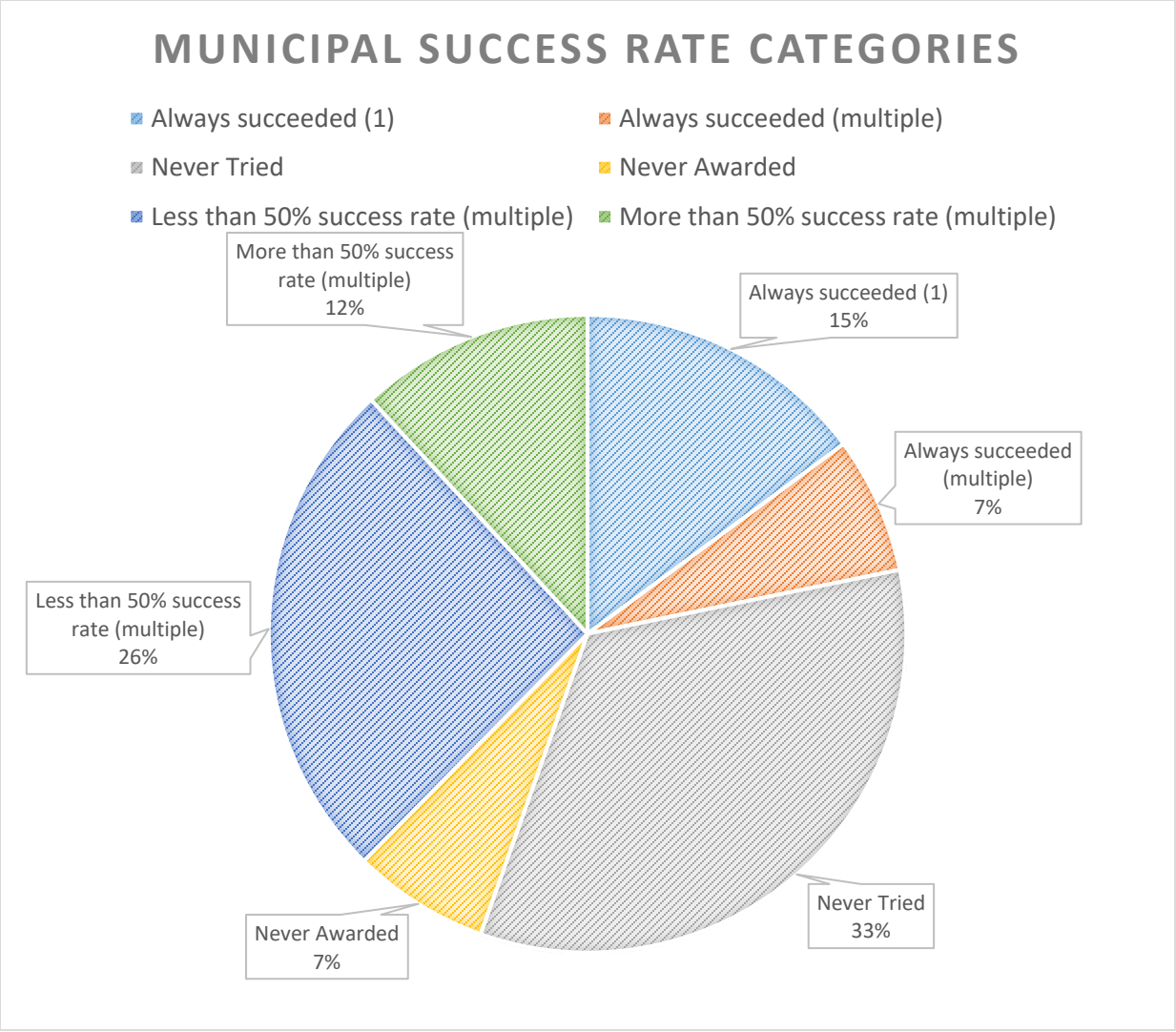

Figure 7: Municipal agencies' PARTF grant success rate categories

In fact, larger towns, mid-size cities, and larger cities who had applied for at least one PARTF grant appeared to experience similar levels of success. For example, 37% of towns with 1,000-9,999 people, 44% of towns with 10,000-49,999 people, and 50% of towns with 50,000 or more people had greater than 50% PARTF success rates. In other words, though statistics seemed to support our hypothesis that larger municipalities experienced higher levels of grant success, those differences were minimal when small towns who had never even tried for a PARTF grant were removed from the equation.

Overall, these quantitative results seem to suggest that population size and park and recreation budgets are NOT the primary factors driving PARTF grant success. So what factors are more important? The qualitative portion of our study was designed to answer that question.

Chapter 3: Qualitative Analysis

1. **Research Objective 1: Identify barriers to grant success (specifically focusing on those that are not financial in nature, given results of objective 1).**
2. **Research Objective 2: Identify strategies for enhancing both organizational and community capacity to achieve grant success.**

3.1. Qualitative Methodology

Research design

The second phase of this mixed methods research explored the challenges and opportunities local governments face when considering and pursuing a grant. Specifically, our objectives for the qualitative analysis were to identify other barriers to grant success (that are not fiscal in nature) and to identify strategies for enhancing both organizational and community capacity to achieve grant success. The case study again focused on PARTF and utilized semi-structured interviews in collaboration with a narrative approach. Interviews were conducted with key informants from a range of diverse local (county/municipal) governments to take a deeper look at the capacity-building factors linked to grant success.

Sample and recruitment protocol

A database provided by NC State Parks Parks and Recreation Trust Fund historical application records enabled us to identify all local parks and recreation entities in North Carolina. *North Carolina local parks and recreation entities* are defined as all local governments that possess public parkland or public recreation facilities, within a functioning division of the local government (e.g., a department of parks, recreation, or cultural resources, or Department of Open Space and Maintenance). Our sampling frame encompassed parks and recreation operations which categorize themselves as municipal, county or joint operations. While there are 100 counties in North Carolina, the majority of local parks and recreation agencies operate as municipalities, of which there are 552 (that is city/town/village) (NCLM, 2016). Currently, there are approximately 652 local government entities in North Carolina that are eligible to apply for a PARTF grant. In the context of the PARTF grant, a 50/50 fiscal or land (donated value of) match is required.

All local parks and recreation entities in North Carolina were categorized with consideration to their corresponding participation with the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund grant as identified in research Phase 1: (1) **Successful applicants** (applicants who have applied and

have been awarded one or more PARTF grants), (2) **unsuccessful applicants** (applicants who have applied and have never been awarded PARTF grants), and (3) **non-participatory applicants** (applicants who have not applied)(Enger & Castellacci, 2016). Each interview domain was also grouped by municipal population. This created the subcategories for which a random-selection would be applied to identify interview participants. Population-based tiers were selected because these groupings often serve as useful proxies for financial resources available to a local government agency (e.g., tax base). These tiers were defined as <10,000 people; 10,000-50,000 people; 50,000+ people. These established tiers also ensured all North Carolina County Tier Designations or Distress Rankings (Figure 2), were represented equitably in this study. Within each grant success category, at least one local government from each respective population-based tier was interviewed to ensure comprehensive and diverse analysis

At least two interview requests were sent to local government representatives within each domain/population subgrouping over an eight week period from September 1, 2018-October 31, 2018. These selections were randomly selected, and sent two formal invitations to participate in the study. The pre-interview questionnaire and study consent form accompanied the formal interview requests. At the end of that eight week period, if contact was not made, or if the contacted entity indicated a desire to not participate, that local government was removed from the sample pool and another two local governments were randomly selected from that specific interview success domain following the same formal invitation process over a second eight week period. This approach to saturation continued until all of the aforementioned grant success domains had at least one interview respondent. Local government officials that returned the signed consent form and pre-interview questionnaire with a willingness to participate were contacted to set up a time for a phone interview. Non-participatory applicants were the most difficult entities in the sample to identify, contact, communicate with, and oblige to participate in the study. Often times, these local governments did not have parks and recreation departments or any full time municipal staff. Therefore, that interview domain ultimately included fewer participants than the other two in this study. The goal of interviewing one participant for each population tier of the three domains was achieved, as demonstrated by figure 2.

Data collection

IRB approval was obtained prior to data collection, including approval of survey instruments (Appendix A, B, C and D). Thirteen (13) phone interviews took place with key

informants representing their corresponding local governments across all of the aforementioned categories (Figure 1). These key informants included recreation directors, planning directors, town/city managers, and county managers. The thirteen interviews lasted an average of 39 minutes with a median of 37 minutes. The shortest interview was 18 minutes in length, while the longest interview constituted a full hour of dialogue. Conversations were recorded on two different recording devices, and each participant was made aware of the recordings prior to the start of the interview. While the interview guide provided a structured start and finish for the conversations, the interviews tended to be flexible throughout, stimulating candid responses. To prevent identifiable study participants, each interview recording was assigned a reference number, which was then encrypted and saved to a drive. All recordings were transcribed in full by the lead researcher, removing any personal identifiers of the respondent. The name of the local government was replaced with the encrypted study participant ID throughout each documented transcription.

Table 1: Interviews Conducted within each Subcategory of PARTF Applicants (Applied Successful; Unsuccessful; and Never Applied) based on Local Population Size (Enger & Castellacci, 2016).

	Grant Success Categories; n=13		
Local Population	**Applied, Successful**	**Applied, Unsuccessful**	**Never Applied**
<10,000	**X X**	**X X**	**X**
10,000-50,000	**X X**	**X**	**X**
50,000+	**X**	**X X**	**X**
Summary of Participants	5 interviews total: 2 municipal governments 3 county governments	5 interviews total: 3 municipal governments 2 county government	3 interviews total: 2 municipal governments 1 county government

Survey Instruments:

Survey invitations (Appendix A) were sent electronically to random selections from the aforementioned 'grant success categories.' After two formal electronic invitations were sent, an informal call or email took place to follow up. If contact could not be made, or if the contact indicated their intention not participate in the study, another potential participant was selected from that same grant success category, and the invitation process repeated itself until all grant success categories were represented. Attached to the electronic survey invitation was a document detailing the purpose and background of this study, and its corresponding **consent information** (Appendix B). This document indicated to survey participants that any information they provided would be unidentifiable in the results and discussion of this study. Interview participants were also informed that consent included agreeing to the interview being recorded and transcribed.

Selected interviewees were asked to complete a **pre-interview questionnaire** (Appendix C) to better facilitate the semi-structured interview. This questionnaire acknowledged general themes that would be beneficial for the interviewer to understand in preparation of the interview to enhance the productivity of the interview conversations. The pre-interview guide contained questions relating to general capacity indicators and relevant grant participation or success. General understanding of past grant success was acknowledged by asking survey participants if their local government has been awarded a past PARTF grant, or any other grant for parks and recreation in the past ten (10) years. Organizational capacity questions elaborated on through the interviews included the existence of a parks and recreation department, ability to produce matching funds, and ability to implement projects if awarded grant funds. Community Capacity was addressed in the pre-interview survey by asking survey participants if they had adequate local resources and capacity to undertake the grant application process. Likert scales were also used for insight into the perceptions of PARTF application difficulty and PARTF grant impacts on the community.

The **Interview guide** (Appendix D) lays the framework for how the interviews were administered. The interview guide includes multiple themes and specific questions within each theme. We explored barriers to participation with these questions: "What aspects of the PARTF application process are the most challenging for your organization?' and "Does one particular factor prevent participation in the grant application process the most?"

We explored strategies for negotiating barriers through organizational capacity with questions like, “You indicated on you pre-survey questionnaire that your local government does/does not have a parks and recreation department; how does having/not having a full-time parks and recreation staff influence your ability to apply for a grant?”, “What organizational factors enhance your efforts in pursuing grants?”, “How does public policy play a role?”, “Are there sufficient physical and financial resources in your community to pursue or develop a grant application?” (Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, 2016); Wendel et. al, 2009; Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan (2012), and “How does the availability of land affect your local government’s ability to apply for parks and recreation grants?”

We addressed community capacity themes by asking, “Can you describe who helps initiate or champion from the community level funding for local parks such as applying for a PARTF grant?” (Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, 2016); Wendel et. al., 2009), “How would you characterize community support for parks and recreation in your community?”(Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, 2016; Laverack (2012);,and “What networks are in place in your community that can aid in grant application development?” (Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, 2016); Wendel et. Al., 2009; Goodman et. al, 1998).

At the end of their interview, respondents were asked to provide feedback or recommendations for PARTF grant administration team so it can better fulfill its appointed mission in the state.

Data analysis

Literature on capacity building themes from various fields of study was examined to identify elements of capacity that could be measured and identified with respondents in the local government parks and recreation context. Specifically, municipal capacity emerged as the important theme, which encompasses the development of organizational and community capacity (Evans, Raymond & Perkins, 2003; CMAP, 2017). Applicable literature looking into those three key themes established a myriad of subthemes that were later utilized to establish the interview tools (interview guide and coding matrix).

An inductive coding approach derived from grounded theory was utilized not to develop new theory, but to better understand an existing system or process (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998). These open coded responses were then systematically coded to create a cohesive narrative of the study themes (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006; Czarniawska, 2004). Through the use of this

narrative analysis, this study acts as a paradigmatic resource for practitioners and academics alike interested in the grant application process in the parks and recreation field (Chase, 2005).

Interview responses provided insight into the challenges and opportunities that exist for different types of local governments throughout North Carolina who had experienced different levels of PARTF grant engagement and success. In preparation for data analysis, ***open coding*** was utilized to group all interview transcriptions into the themes the interview guide postured (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). These themes were expounded by identifying several properties, or subcategories. For example the larger themes such as challenges in the grant application process and organizational capacity were subcategorized by themes such as collaboration, community buy-in, and planning resources (Table 2). These themes and subcategories were then synthesized through ***selective coding*** to create a narrative matrix, which ultimately became the outline for the appendix of this study (Creswell, 2004)(Table 2). With this tool in place, interview transcription data was filtered into corresponding matrix sections, creating a transparent resource of results from which to form a more coherent discussion (Czarniawska, 2004). This matrix was ultimately molded and expounded into a narrative analysis with an emphasis on sector-wide applicability (Chase, 2005). The resulting presentation of results that follows should be useful for both researches and practitioners hoping to better understand the key barriers to ingredients for grant success.

Table 2: Narrative matrix used to selectively code transcription data; narrative matrix was used to code different themes within interview responses.

Narrative Matrix	Key Themes						
Key (Interview Domain)							
Never Applied							
Unsuccessful Applicant							
Successful Applicant							
	Funding	Other Application Challenges	Organizational Capacity	Community Capacity	Rec. for Parks and Recreation Agencies	Rec. for Grant Administrators	Rec. for researchers
Sub-Cateogories							
Ability to administer the grant							
Capital Improvement Plan			Quote 2				
Citizen Input	Quote 1			Quote 1			
Collaborations and Partnerships							
Community Resilience							
Creating Buy-in				Quote 1			
Diversity/Equity							
General Planning			Quote 2				
Human Resources							
Intergovernmental cooperation							
Local Government Support							
Local Politics							
Master Plans			Quote 2				
Matching Funds							
Money is issue/small tax base							
Opportunity Cost							
Parks and Recreation Advisory Board							
Parks and Rereation Department							
Recreation Needs Assessment			Quote 1	Quote1			
Stakeholder Engagement							

Statement of reflexivity

Because the lead researcher was embedded in the PARTF grant process (as a consultant for North Carolina's Recreation Resource Service), it is important to consider subjectivity in implementation and interpretation of interviews with grant applicants. The following statement of reflexivity (Wilkinson, 1988) highlights those potential biases and their implications:

"I am a white, middle class, non-disabled male that has over a decade of experience in the parks and recreation field. My career in this field has included positions such as: Parks and Recreation Director, Parks and Recreation Consultant, and Grants Management Specialist. Specifically, my position as a Parks and Recreation Consultant for Recreation Resources Service should be acknowledged for potential implications (assets and liabilities) in the context of this study. Recreation Resources Service provides technical assistance to local parks and recreation departments in the state of North Carolina. As a consultant, I had direct interactions and involvement with the type of local government leaders/key informants that participated in this study. I also played a direct role in the consulting for, and scoring of, submitted PARTF grants in the years 2016-2018. Being this close to the subject matter has obvious objectivity considerations, but it also provides the experience to ask and understand complicated questions within the subject matter area. Interview respondents were made fully aware throughout the process I acted on behalf of North Carolina State University as a researcher, not as a Recreation Resource Service practitioner. There is a possibility study participants withheld participation or strong opinions as a result of me working directly with the specific grant of examination, but the high interview response rate and the corresponding candid responses indicated otherwise."
-Kyle E. Smith

3.2. Results

Results confirmed a belief widely recognized throughout the field: parks, recreation, and leisure amenities help improve the quality of life of individuals within a community. However, constricted local appropriations for parks and recreation was also a common theme with most interview respondents, as well as the negative impacts on communities that follow funding shortages. Without alternative funding opportunities to supplement local appropriations for parks and recreation, community health and wellness needs may go unmet. Grants, act as a valuable and attainable alternative to local funding for parks and recreation, and they may provide the supplemental funds for local governments to consider new capital projects or land acquisitions for future park development.

Capital projects that require significant land allocation and infrastructure can be taxing on the public if not paired with alternative funding streams like grants. Given that grants are a source of alternative funding that can enhance the health and wellbeing of a locality, and that local appropriations to parks and recreation may often times be limited, one question persists: *why not participate in the grant application process?* A common response to this question, based on both anecdotes and interview responses, was the **inability to produce matching funds or the unwillingness to invest funds to enhance capacity.**

3.2.1. Challenges local governments face in the grant application process

Lack of financial resources

When asked how matching funds play a role in grant application participation, one interview respondent who had yet to apply for a PARTF grant offered this blunt reply: “Money is the deciding factor.” An unsuccessful PARTF applicant added, “The financial aspect is the hardest to overcome in rural communities.” Another noted, “The matching funds are the most limiting factor, coming up with that money.” And another unsuccessful PARTF applicant added, “The support is there but the problem is this area does not have much money, and as it stands right now the city is not going to raise any taxes or anything similar to raise extra funding for parks or recreation.” One interview respondent explicitly stated that financial resources trump capacity when applying for grants, “I think it is the money. I think the capacity is very manageable, I can only talk for rural communities, or this rural community, but I think the financial aspect is the hardest to overcome in rural communities.”

One PARTF applicant detailed how its administration viewed pursuing grant opportunities, “At one point, our town manager was only looking at grants with a larger matching portion, so we would be required to tie up less money.” Even interviewees with previous PARTF success thought money was the most limiting factor in grant applications. “Finding a match without having to use general operating dollars is the hardest part of the application for us; Really selling that project to the community and of course commissioners that the project is worthy of spending tax dollars on, has been a priority of ours.” One PARTF applicant added, “That is the challenge for most communities -coming up with a local match if another funding mechanism is not in place, and convincing council to commit to that match in addition to their regular operating budget.” Another PARTF applicant succinctly summarized all of these perspectives: “As federal grant sources like the Land, Water, Conservation Fund, and other local opportunities become rare, it will take more of a local commitment to pursue grants like PARTF.” That commitment, however, does not necessarily need to be solely financial to find grant success. Other factors exist that challenge and influence a local government’s ability to successfully navigate the grant application process.

Lack of human resources

Interview respondents also indicated that challenges other than insufficient fiscal resources influenced participation in the grant application process. Multiple respondents indicated **staff skills and/or shortages** as major constraints in pursuing alternative funding streams for parks and recreation. One local official that had never applied for a PARTF grant indicated their greatest barriers were a “**lack of staffing** due to vacant positions” and “not having a full time parks and recreation department like other nearby towns.” An interview respondent who has yet to submit a PARTF application put management of small parks and recreation departments in perspective:

> “It [the PARTF grant application] is a lot of work for a small town…**I would be developing the application myself**, and I am running 19 events a year and managing a park and rec board and census, and doing all the administrative duties like answering the phones, managing community centers and field rentals, you know it’s a lot. It’s a lot. That is why we have not applied to this point, because I am not going to do it and fail at it.”

Local government staffing constrictions in other departments can also impact those considering grant applications, as one interview respondent humorously remarked, “I asked the planning director if putting together some of the resources we needed for the application and development of other parks is something the planning department could do. He replied ‘you are looking at the planning department!’”

Some local governments may negotiate the challenges that correspond with limited staffing in the grant application process by outsourcing and contracting services and tasks out to a third party. However, contracting services also requires fiscal resources. As a PARTF applicant explained, “With a small department such as ours, we just couldn’t afford to allocate money to develop a grant, when basic services are needed.” Another interview respondent also suggested that hiring a consultant to assist with grant applications is not financially responsible, “$20k is a lot of money, for no guarantee that you will get a grant.” One PARTF awardee described how prioritizing contracted services enhanced their efforts in the application process by decreasing staff obligation, while also acknowledging this financial element, “When we submit an application we hold ourselves to a certain standard, and to maintain that standard we have to contract out for some of those pieces we can’t develop internally, and by doing that we know we are keeping our standards high, but at the same time we have to spend funds to get that done.”

Details, documentation and time

While grant applicants need to have adequate staffing resources for working on the grant, another challenge local governments face is the level of **detail, documentation, and corresponding time** required for application. As one PARTF applicant stressed, “The problem I see agencies have is 1.) **The time it takes to develop and complete an application** and 2.) The ability to find resources or personnel with a background in grant writing.” So while limited staffing within a local government is often a challenge, a separate challenge is the staff time devoted to (i.e., opportunity cost) of working on a grant application. One respondent who had yet to apply for a PARTF grant lamented, “Since I took this position it has just been me sticking fingers in the dyke to keep the dam from busting…**No time**.” Another interview respondent detailed how the application process takes time and attention to detail, “Out of all the grants we have applied for, the PARTF is certainly the most thorough and time consuming. Not to say that it is unattainable, but it is very detailed oriented, so you need to make sure you spend time with the application reviewing criteria and all the fine print requirements.”

An unsuccessful applicant spoke to this theme too: “I guess the hardest part is finding the time, because it is quite in depth, so finding the time to do it correctly and understand it.” A PARTF grant awardee talked about the importance of understanding what the application is requesting:

> “What the PARTF grant application requires the most of is **reading**. The hardest part of the PARTF grant for most people is they don’t read all the information provided in the application before submitting it, so they miss half the steps in the process. PARTF is well documented on how to do it, but you really have to read and pay attention on what changes from one year to the next to make sure you are meeting all the requirements of the grant.”

Another unsuccessful PARTF applicant reiterated the challenges associated with a detail-oriented grant application, “The process is tedious, because of all the **documentation** you have to provide, and you are always worried about not getting enough points to make sure you are competitive.”

A past PARTF awardee summarized what is needed to find success in the application process, “For PARTF, your objective is to go through the application checklist and get as many as points as you can, and some of the items required to receive those points cost money, like a site plan, or master plan, or at least the **opportunity cost of time**.”

One applicant provided a dose of reality: “It is hard to predict how much time the PARTF application will take, but it is not something you can just throw together in a couple of days. A full time staff and devoted resources helps us navigate the process.” A successful PARTF applicant stressed how accountability through creation of deadlines helps staff and stakeholders overcome this challenge:

> “Looking at the big picture early is critical for grant applications so you don’t miss any of your **deadlines**. To me the most challenging part is making sure things **stay on schedule** for completing components of the application on time. We do this through collaborative coordination: Getting everyone that needs to be involved in the process involved; we create a stakeholder group, hold regular meetings, and keep each other accountable.”

Planning resources

Both successful and unsuccessful grant applicants said that a **dearth of planning resources**, such as master plans or community needs assessments, were a significant barrier to

grant success. A PARTF awardee spoke to the importance of a recreation needs survey when developing a grant application, claiming "it is the **ultimate** guide." Alternatively, an unsuccessful PARTF applicant shared how not having important planning resources prevented them from being awarded, "Some requirements of the application we do not currently have developed, like a finished master plan or survey. Some other aspects of the application, like mapping, we don't have the technical pieces for, that is why we outsource it, and that is an extra expense for us."

An interview respondent that has yet to apply for a PARTF grant acknowledged some planning resources their local government has yet to produce, "We are in the process of doing our conceptual plan, putting in a Request for Proposal for a conceptual design phase; we realize we **need master plans or conceptual plans for this process**, but we can't fund those items without assistance." Again, the cost associated with establishing these application resources emerged as a theme. Another unsuccessful PARTF applicant elaborates on the challenge of developing required planning resources, "Not having all of the documents and resources needed for the application is our biggest problem, and as a result we would need to solicit outside sources to finalize the application." An interview respondent who has never applied for the PARTF grant struggled to meet the mandatory application requirement of a site plan and analysis, "We met with an engineer and to put together a site plan is going to cost $18-20K for a bare bone conceptual design, so that is my whole entire parks and recreation budget for next year Interview respondents discussed the importance of two unique types of local government master plans: comprehensive or system-wide master plans and site-specific master plans (not specified in some instances). As one individual who never applied for a PARTF grant stated, **"Master plan** development is the main challenge." Another did not consider grant applications a fruitful endeavor without a site-specific master plan, "We know PARTF is scored according to points, and with such fierce competition and **no master plan**, we are not going to put in for the grant." In one case, a grant applicant suggested that a comprehensive master plan for parks and recreation is not plausible:

> "There is no way we would get a **comprehensive master plan** for all our parks because we just don't have the resources. We would love to do a master plan and include our dream project in there, but our local government can't afford that right now, we just don't have the resources, **so we will pick our battles**."

Another challenge county parks and recreation departments may face is establishing a network of cities and towns working together to create a robust system-wide plan, as evidenced in a response from a local government not interested in applying for PARTF, "The municipalities within the county are doing their own master plans internally. Typically there is no collaboration to create a county wide plan. We would have to be the ones to spearhead that." Another respondent representing a government that has never applied for PARTF seemed motivated to pursue a master plan for the grant if encouraged to do so, "I kept informing the city manager that if we want to seek funds for this project, we need to update our master plan, and he understood that, but it was not necessarily a priority at that time. We knew full well of the funding opportunity, but we were missing that component, our master plan is 11 years old." Knowing about the existence of the funding opportunity but not consciously not pursuing it as a result of an insufficient master plan is a shared commonality among many study participants. A past PARTF awardee shares a strong opinion on the impact a comprehensive master plan should have on a local government's decision to pursue a grant:

> "If you are a parks and recreation department that doesn't have a **comprehensive master plan**, then that is an obvious challenge. To me, it doesn't make sense for the deciding authority to approve a grant award of any substantial size if there is no comprehensive master plan, if there is no guiding principles to what you are doing. But at the same time, a comprehensive parks and recreation master plan can be $50-120k, depending on what you want to get out of it."

Local politics and conflicting priorities

The way local governments function and make decisions is inextricably linked to the composition of local government officials and council representatives and how they manage conflicting priorities and internal controls. This internal composition of the government entity embodies its structural capacity (Hall, et. al, 2003) successful PARTF applicant stressed this theme, "We have a board that sees the need for parks and recreation, but it is being able to prioritize who needs it more right now." Understandably, each local government department petitions for their fair share of the tax generated operating fund each year. This innate competition leads to prioritization of funding allocations. A local official yet to apply for PARTF highlighted this competition that exists within the public service sector, "Town Council is

supportive of parks and recreation, their problem is [all of the departments] are asking them for money." An unsuccessful PARTF applicant contextualized these conflicting priorities:

> "Right now we are having issues with school funding, so additional funding, in any capacity, is sensitive. When I first got here, I was told funding for any new development was not available for the next couple years, because we were so behind in our school development. I can't see them dedicating funding to expand parks and recreation offerings, and not getting a lot of negative feedback from the public. ***Parks and recreation gets put on the backburner*** when it comes to competing with the school system for funding."

Struggles with grant administration

A successful PARTF applicant provided insight on how local governments must also consider their ability to manage a grant award. "Financing the grant is up there as a limiting factor, but administration of the grant is also very important." Another successful applicant echoed a similar sentiment, "The application itself isn't that hard, the hard part is managing and monitoring the grant after it is awarded."

> "It is one thing to build things and create new things, it is another thing **to maintain it**, and that is something the local government officials should consider. Because naturally, when it comes to infrastructure like this new park, that is going to be an increase in taxpayer funded budgets. If we apply for a grant, we must have all our ducks in a row to **fully implement** it from start to finish, otherwise our city manager does not want us applying for it. She wants to make sure we have the land, human resources and tools to see the project complete in full."

These responses from past award recipients illustrate how many agencies struggle with the challenge of implementing and facilitating grant requirements and responsibilities post award. Contractual agreements on grant assisted development with the awarding body often remain in place for decades, so the capacity to manage and maintain grant funded assets into the future should be a key consideration when considering any grant application.

3.2.2. Building and maintaining organizational capacity

While objective 1 aimed to clearly show, in the context of the PARTF grant, if financial resources are significant limiting factors for grant success, objective 2 helped us understand the other challenges that local governments face in the grant application process. Given all of these

challenges, financial and otherwise, it is easy to see why many agencies might struggle to successfully procure alternative funding like PARTF grants. But interview responses also revealed two main factors that can help: organizational and community capacity.

Through the analysis of interview responses, objective 3 of this study aimed to identify strategies local governments can implement to develop and sustain organizational and community capacity. Organizational capacity is generally defined as an organization's ability to develop and maintain capital used to produce desired outputs and outcomes (Hall, et. al., 2003). Community capacity typically refers to the ability of individuals, organizations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive change (Howe & Cleary, 2001). In this section, we used participant responses to examine how local governments develop and maintain the capital and organizational resources to successfully apply and receive grants like PARTF. First we will examine how local governments can negotiate many of the primary grant application challenges by focusing on factors that help to build and maintain organizational capacity.

Existence of a functioning parks and recreation department

An initial key step in building organizational capacity to attain grant success is the formation and existence of a parks and recreation department. A PARTF awardee explained how full time departmental staff enhance their efforts in pursuing grant opportunities, "It [having a full time parks and recreation department with dedicated staff] gives us the **time and manpower we need.** We sit down with our partners, and GIS team to develop the plans, with a full time parks and rec staff, we are able to dedicate a few bodies to developing the grant application as well as obligate personnel to solicit other departments for their help in the process for things that are skilled specific."

Many towns, however, do not have this luxury, and are forced to adapt and do what they can, as expressed by an unsuccessful PARTF applicant, "We do not have a parks and recreation department, like a lot of surrounding towns do. We do have maintenance that maintains the parks but they also maintain water and sewer and the streets, so parks are just part of their job. The town clerk puts grant applications together in addition to her traditional job responsibilities." In other cases, departments are new and recently formed and many agency staff aren't sure how to fulfill their mission and goals related to community health and development. As one non-participatory interviewee noted:

> "The department itself has only been in formation for four (4) years. The town tried, unsuccessfully, to apply for a PARTF grant because it is known how much parks and recreation improvements are needed, but they didn't know how to actually navigate the process…you have to have some knowledge, or at least know who to ask, to walk you through the process, because it is not an easy process."

One PARTF awardee provided an alternative perspective on how success can be achieved creatively, with assistance from other government units: "All prior grants have been done in-house, with the full responsibility falling on the recreation department, but the **entire staff is included**. We work very closely with our public works department that has been instrumental in greenway and park planning, and they have been a huge asset."

Existence of a dedicated grant writer

While the existence of a functioning department may be vital to long-term agency success, one role is particularly important for grant success: **the role of a dedicated grant writer.** As one PARTF awardee explained:

> "A dedicated staff member is needed simply for follow through of the application. It is very challenging to apply for the first time. If you think you can go into this grant application and fill out a form and submit what you have, that doesn't work. You really have to think ahead, eyes open, with the understanding of the required documents and then started the process of getting those documents in place, and that requires dedicated personal to be successful."

Another successful PARTF applicant who had approached grant application with various strategies highlights how an external grant writer, in collaboration with a full time dedicated staff member, maximized the external funding opportunity:

> "It is more difficult without a dedicated full time staff assigned. We have done it before without a full time staff member specifically for the grant, but having that staff helps with understanding the things a grant writer may not know about. I rely on our designer for conceptual plans and the latest trends to collaborate with departmental staff who provides insight into the needs, design, wants and trends, and then the grant writer can take all that collective information and incorporate it into the application; **Working together is the most important."**

Existence of a supportive Parks and Recreation Advisory Board or Commission

Parks and Recreation Advisory Boards or Commissions are often the **backing voices** and **policy influencers** for parks and recreation offerings in a community. Parks and recreation boards or commissions provide support for many of the local governments interviewed for this study. As expressed by a past PARTF awardee, "The Recreation commission has been in constant support of parks and recreation in the community." But not all local governments have a functioning board or commission specifically dedicated to parks and recreation. Other communities may have inactive boards. As one unsuccessful applicant recalled, "We do have an advisory board, but it is not functioning as active at this time." Even when parks and recreation boards exist, they may be comprised of homogenous stakeholders, presenting challenges in its own right. As a never applied PARTF interviewee indicated: "Our park and recreation board is not very strong. A lot of them are fisherman, because we have lakes, and they are interested exclusively in that. We are trying to make that board more diverse with different populations of users that better represents our residents."

When a Parks and Recreation Advisory Board is **engaged, diverse, and committed** to improving the life of residents equitably, numerous outcomes and benefits can be achieved. One positive result of an active park and recreation board is their ability to assist with identifying and procuring alternative funding sources. An unsuccessful PARTF applicant detailed how their local parks and recreation board assists with the grant application process, "On this one park committee we have 4 of the 7 commissioners involved in the process, and when park projects are proposed, they are almost always approved unanimously because information is communicated before and throughout the process." A PARTF awardee recalled how establishing an advisory board can yield immediate returns and relieve some of the grant application obligations of staff, "The parks and recreation advisory board provides a lot of assistance with grant writing and development for the PARTF grant."

A successful PARF applicant expounds on the important role a parks and recreation advisory board can hold:

> "The board of commissioners appointed the parks and recreation advisory board that are the true advocates of parks and rec in the community, very active, diverse group right now; all recommendations go through them, so if I identify a grant that would be a good fit, it goes through the parks and recreation advisory board and they would make the

> recommendation up to the Board of Commissioner. So that is a very valuable body and voice in this community.

Ability to acquire land

A fundamental aspect of parks and recreation development is the availability of useable land. A local government may have the ability to add new leisure offerings or developments, but not the land to do so. Conversely, a local government may have substantial land banked and adequate physical resources but are unable to expend the resources to develop it. This dissonance exists most commonly in highly metropolitan and rural areas, where land is most valuable and most affordable, respectively. Physical assets, such as availability of land for development, is an important component of organizational capacity in parks and recreation grant application because park grants most often fund capital projects and land acquisitions. Applicants pursuing capital improvement grant funds must have land for development in hand to be considered for project funding. Likewise, applicants pursuing land acquisition grants should have a pre-existing relationship with the land owner, and a mutual understanding of terms of sale. Several physical assets therefore play an important role in developing the organizational capacity of a community.

A **scarcity in land available for park development** can create challenges when pursuing alternative funding sources like grants. A PARTF awardee elaborated, "Availability of land is very much a struggle as we are basically **built out** based on our capacity and how we move forward with that." An interviewee whose local government has never applied for a PARTF grant held the same opinion but in different circumstances:

> "Land availability is a challenge. We are in the center of the state but a lot of private agricultural, hunting and fishing land and other activities besides recreation already exist; at the same time it is hard to explain to elected officials why we need more open space when the majority of the county is still rural. If people **can't access those resources** because they are private, it does nobody any good."

Some communities may feel they have built out available land, while others express a need for development, "As far as land and land use, we have one park now. We are looking at other areas, but it is not where it needs to be. We do not have a park system. We are essentially just getting started. Resources can always be an inhibitor." An unsuccessful grant applicant added, "Parks are like schools where the biggest expense is the land. We were very fortunate to have the land for the park donated." Donated land for parks, or land at a bargain sale, are

opportunities local governments should always be pursuing to enhance their physical asset capacity. A PARTF awardee spoke to a desire but inability to **land bank**: "a lot of larger municipalities are able to land bank, set aside properties for when they are ready for it, I don't think at this time we could sustain that, maybe with additional growth we could, but not at this point." Another participant spoke to how land banking helps brood projects into reality, "We are very fortunate to have two viable parcels of land, where we have done a really good job of land banking, and there is also an opportunity for collaboration with our school system to link to the parcel, and then lead into the downtown park."

Acquiring land without intention is a waste of local resources. Local governments should have operating procedures or a written plan that details **how land acquisitions are prioritized.** A past grant awardee explains:

> "We have identified community and regional park priorities for the county as part of the planning process. We are constantly looking for available land as it becomes available. We partner with our municipalities on most of our parks, so we are jointly looking when land becomes available. But realistically, we can't do everything at one time, so they fall out into where the land becomes available first in collaboration with when the community is willing to help fund things. We address acquisition priorities in the master plan and have plenty of land available in the county where we have identified a need for park and open space, but the regional park plan needs to be reevaluated as that much of our land has increased in value."

Another PARTF grant recipient detailed how land acquisition for parks is articulated in their parks and recreation master plan, "We have quite a bit of plots of land that have been bought or acquired to be earmarked for parkland. Once we acquire the land, we prioritize the land based on what is the most ready, and least expensive to develop. In the acquisition process we look at land availability based on where our other facilities might be and making sure we are not overdeveloping specific areas while leaving others underdeveloped." Parks and recreation departments can position themselves for success when grant opportunities arise by owning land that can be primed for development. To do that, they must develop positive relationships with landowners.

In many cases, a city may take ownership of a whole facility that can be converted, or in some cases a simple turn-key acquisition, as an expansive physical asset to their capacity to meet

citizen needs. Having positive relationships with nonprofits, private businesses and landowners can prove to be critical when the local government is offered first right of refusal on land or property prior to it going to market for sale. Some departments have full time positions specifically for working with land owners on potential local park and recreation land acquisitions or right of way (easement) permissions. Having developable land is fundamental for optimizing parks and recreation grant opportunities. These **developable land opportunities** create assets which through grant application or another form of alternative funding can be enhance the community landscape.

Land owner relations are not without challenges, as one unsuccessful PARTF applicant noted, “Some people see the need of parks and recreation and would love to have a park or greenway in their area, and others push back and say when you get to my property you are stopping!” A representative from a local government that had never applied for PARTF described public opinion on easements for parks and recreation: “Most support it, but you always have some that are fearful of what it may bring to the community in terms of trash, drugs, lights, noise and traffic. We get more support than opposition, but are always sure to hear **‘not in my back yard.**’” Managing delicate relationships with citizens often requires direction and guiding standard principles. A PARTF awardee spoke to their need for a **greenway and trails master plan** (unique to their comprehensive parks and recreation master plan) to spearhead acquisition efforts, “We need a greenway and trails master plan to guide that decision making process. It is a delicate of balancing the benefits and impeding on their property and the right to remain private.”

Other opportunities to increase a local government’s organizational capacity to enhance physical assets include a willingness to engage cross-departmental projects, thus achieving collaborative goals. The goals of the planning and zoning department are surely unique to the goals of the parks and recreation department, so collaborative communication and input is key in addressing department or program specific implications. An unsuccessful PARTF applicant spoke to inter-governmental collaboration, “Our planning department usually handles greenway planning. We have had full partnerships with businesses and land owners. The park we are about to develop we just purchased an additional parcel that abuts the park to expand programming, allowing us to keep our initial master plan, and expand on it.” A PARTF awardee shares how their relationships internally are complimented by outsourcing, “We have a close relationship to all departments in the city, public works especially. Recreation Resources Service has provided

support through regional consultants, as well as external consulting. It is possible to do well with PARTF without in-house engineering." Another municipal government representative spoke to their recent collaborative effort with the county government in pursuing a Department of Transportation grant:

> "We actually just partnered with X County Planning department for X grant that would put in over X miles of greenway that would connect our municipality to our neighboring municipality of X. So that is a huge potential with a $1X million grant. We are keeping our fingers crossed. The partnership element of this is looked upon favorably, I think the funders, the taxpayers of the county as well as our municipality are excited about any time you can join forces to accomplish larger projects."

While local government organizational relations are important, relationships with the landowners themselves rules supreme. Being able to identify landowners that are able and willing to enhance their community through parks and recreation, or communicating the benefits to those that do not, should be a top priority for local governments:

> "One of the selling points we have implemented for these easements is that through providing an easement we will **actually increase property value** by using X funds to restore the stream bank along the greenway. The property owners that saw major erosion happening were quickly in favor of it. Those that were on the fence, once they learned more about the easement process through education, they worked with us a little bit better. With the process we have for obtaining easements right now, we work with the agricultural department to validate benefits to farmers and private land holders that in the past have put up resistance."

Open communication and collaboration are critical to stakeholder relations in regards to land as well as many other aspects of organizational capacity.

Developing organizational plans

As we have already seen, one of the most fundamental elements of parks and recreation grants is a well encompassing **site specific master plan**. This plan often holds high priority as it is the literal plan for how potential grant funds will be used. Without such a plan, funders may be hesitant to allocate grant monies. The PARTF authority defines a site-specific master plan as 'a **long-range plan for one park** that contains a site analysis; a description of the community's

recreational needs; property acquisition boundaries; and the proposed location of all capital improvements' (PARTF, 2019).

One unsuccessful PARTF applicant underscored the importance a site-specific plan can have on organizational capacity:

> "We are considering applying after our parks and recreation master plan, because now we can apply for substantial grant funds, before we did not meet all the requirements with our previous plan, and of course, you want to check as many boxes of the application as possible to be competitive. So that is what we have been working on, establishing the infrastructure for the department but also the infrastructure for the documentation to move forward with asking for high dollar funds."

One respondent from a local government that has never applied for a PARTF grant spoke to how before even considering funding a park, their local Town Council would need to consider funding a site specific master plan, "My board would not be able to set that money aside for matching funds at one time, so they would first have to set aside money to create the plan." A never applied PARTF applicant elaborated on the dissonance that exists between plan and implantation:

> "The way us bureaucrats work is we look to the master plan, and the politicians look elsewhere. You may here from a constituent, wouldn't this be a great place for a park, and our general response is well have we identified that as a priority site in our master plan? Does it meet the following criteria: biologically, geologically, archeologically, recreationally significant? We look at it more analytically than they do politically. In my experience you probably need a plan 18 months out minimum from considering grant application, because there is value in applying, but you don't want to get to a point where you may be wasting your time."

Another PARTF applicant expressed how a site-specific master plan has provided the unique perspective needed to accomplish project goals:

> "We are fortunate here, that the council is very supportive of park and recreation; they just needed to figure out what comes next? And the master plan was a big portion of that. We did an inventory study, a needs assessment, now we know **what needs to come next in the next 5-10** years to improve parks and recreation for our citizens. Next the Capital

Improvement Plan comes into play, so we can offset some of the costs to our citizens. Our council just does not understand how competitive this grant is."

One way grant applicants can enhance their organizational capacity for success in this competitive grant climate is through the formation and implementation of an additional comprehensive, or system wide, parks and recreation master plan.

A **comprehensive, or system wide,** plan describes the long term vision of how local parks and recreation will address the needs of its citizens across the entire jurisdiction (PARTF, 2019). One interview respondent indicated a comprehensive plan for parks would be beneficial, "It would help us a lot, we need to do it, but have not yet. We are trying to figure out what they are doing in the surrounding communities and try to implement some of that stuff, but a comprehensive plan would really help out." Immediately adjacent municipalities may provide leisure offerings and spaces that can provide citizens a relative comparison for their own community. If a community indicates parks and recreation offerings are lacking relative to their local municipal peers and tax bases, **creating, reexamining or updating a comprehensive master plan** should be considered.

How robust these types of plans are corresponds directly to the size and scope of the community and its current and anticipated future leisure offerings. County parks and recreation master plans, for example, implement the results and recommendations from each municipality (which may have their own municipal comprehensive parks and recreation master plan) to create a guiding vision for the entire county. One respondent from a never applied county government detailed the challenge presented in the absence of a plan, "We do not have a county parks and recreation plan. Each one of the towns are separate. But what happens is we don't really work together that much." Municipalities working together on a regional level is important because shared goals can be created and pursued that benefits multiple user groups. Understanding parks and recreation sites and offerings on a regional level maximizes tax dollars by prioritizing development equitably. Participation in this process is key, as municipalities can be left out of the conversation for regional development if they do not have an active voice at the table.

Additional benefits arise from identifying service gaps on a regional level. One is a simple understanding of what is where and how it is being utilized. As one PARTF applicant noted, "Based on the comprehensive parks and recreation master plan, there are a number of **inadequate or lack of facilities** identified that needed to be a part of this county for recreation

service delivery." A representative from a local government that has never applied for PARTF provided perspective on how communication is key in the comprehensive planning process:

> "We have had comprehensive plan meetings where different cities would take care of different regions of the county, and group it together and see where we can all meet. Let's face it, we don't want to build a trail on the western side of the county, and a trail on the eastern side of the county, and have them not link up, and that is not going to happen unless we **communicate**."

Comprehensive master plans are a guiding resource that require a significant amount of time and other resources to create. Ample planning and citizen engagement are required just to visualize the plan, and all drafts must first be vetted and approved by the local governments' council. Developing a plan of this breadth is challenging, which is why this task is often outsourced to consultants or planners. Other resources exist however, which can enable a local government to tackle large scale, long term, plans. As a never applied PARTF applicant highlighted:

> "Our last comprehensive plan was 23 years ago; it is woefully inefficient, and I am not sure if you have heard of NC Innovate, but we have been using their resource of quantifiable objectives that can be used in a planner's tool box. For a comprehensive plan to be truly effective, even if it slows up the process, we definitely want to have as many citizens as possible engaged. Eventually, it makes the plan easier to implement, even though getting it approved will probably take a longer period of time."

Through the establishment of system-wide standards for park and recreation, local governments can better understand and prioritize the areas of the park system that fall below set minimum standards. This philosophy speaks to local government efforts to equitably distribute the common resource, but also to how identifying areas that can be enhanced with alternative funding is the precursor to pursuing those projects. One PARTF applicant summarized the importance of this type of plan in addition to the ability to adapt as time, interest, and trends change:

> "A **comprehensive parks and recreation master plan** is a **guiding principle**, especially if it is kept up to date. Ours is getting to a point where it could use an update in the next few years. Luckily for us, our needs assessment done in 2017 lined up with the results from 2013. The identified land needs for recreation facilities is still there, but we also

> have to keep in mind when prioritizing our efforts **what is trending?** For example, when we were going through design development for our current park, designs completely changed because residents wanted different amenities than what was initially proposed. And you have to focus on what is trending in addition to what is in your comprehensive plan.

Many interview respondents indicated planning resources were difficult to attain because of fiscal limitations. The reality for local governments is that they must **plan for and invest in planning.** One of the most common ways for a local government to plan for these types of fiscal investments that can enhance their organizational capacity is through a **capital improvement plan.** As previously detailed, potential grant applicants face a significant challenge in the grant application process when it comes to producing matching funds. In the context of the PARTF grant, a 50/50 fiscal or land (donated value of) match is required. One PARTF applicant explained the necessity of planning for large matching contributions, "Usually the matching types of grants are touch and go. We may have the fiscal resources available we may not. Naturally, we would not have $300,000 sitting ideally by unless it was in our capital improvement plan to pursue a PARTF grant." Another grant applicant provided different insight from a fiscal capacity perspective and shared thoughts on the challenges of less affluent communities:

> "We are fortunate enough here to be able to keep monies aside in our general fund for when grant opportunities arise, and our commissioners are very supportive, so they know they have to put in a little bit of money to help us apply for these grants. Some communities that are more poverty driven than we are, and have a whole lot lower tax rate than we have, just don't have the resources to apply for a good PARTF grant to develop a nice park. I think they have to look a little lower. It would be good to have an 80/20 for some lower capacity communities, because even coming up with 20k for a 100k project is extremely hard for some communities, especially in the mountain region of NC."

One PARTF awardee elaborated, 'Naturally, if you have a comp plan there will be guidelines for applying for grants. You need to then strategically align that with your organization's financial constraints (what are those constraints) and are there ways to get the proposed project in the Capital Improvement Plan? It is really specific to the organization as a

whole and what you have to leverage." Alternatively, some local governments are of the opinion that matching funds stimulates commitment and lends to the success of the proposed project, underscoring the need for long term fiscal oversight and planning. As one respondent remarked:

> "We are finding out through design, bidding process, and rebidding, that **no project comes in under budget.** We are in a climate with plenty of work, driving up costs. Thus, for major park projects, having a low match is not going to help much unless you are going to have passive facilities that are not that expensive. Big projects require much more than the maximum match of the grant allows."

While that is the perspective of a local government that prioritizes large park developments, grant applicants must also consider their ability to actually implement the grant and cover the required costs of the proposed project if awarded. "While the money may sound excellent, you need the depth in the department to facilitate grant administration and implementation on the back end. You may meet the initial criteria for a successful application, but not the capacity for administrative process post award." Implementing a capital improvement plan, and having parks and recreation included in that plan, is critical for longitudinal development of recreation resources in a community, helping agencies overcome many of those administrative barriers. Making the case for parks and recreation to be adequately represented in the capital improvement plan begins most often with citizen input and endorsement.

When one Parks and Recreation Director was asked about understanding citizen needs, he indicated, "I haven't really spoken to anyone outside our town council and our parks and recreation advisory board." But the input from town council and the parks and recreation advisory board is hardly all encompassing, because those individuals are not the only ones in the community that may wish to participate in leisure activities. To understand the leisure needs of all citizens, a local government often employs a **recreation needs assessment**. The PARTF Authority describes a survey of recreational needs as a survey of the citizens in the local government's jurisdiction to identify their needs and preferences for recreational opportunities (PARTF, 2019). These assessment surveys usually correspond to the first phase of master planning, as citizen input should help to define priorities and expectations.

Some local governments have yet to implement a recreation needs survey, as they feel they need more internal resources first. As one respondent said:

> "We haven't done any comprehensive survey of citizen needs because we just are not that far along in the process. What we are planning to do right now is get an audit to get an engineer to complete a conceptual design drawing, so we can apply for the grant. We would then like them to do a citizen engagement piece, or help us with it as well."

A non-participatory local government representative indicated other internal priorities take precedent to such a survey: "Our last needs assessment done was in 2005, and for me that is on my list of things that needs to be done. Policies and Procedures needed to be updated first though, and we have a five year plan to get things functioning as they should be in regards to differed maintenance." In this case, asking the public about new recreation offerings was not necessarily prioritized because tackling deferred maintenance was of immediate importance, as local governments naturally tend to not build new facilities unless they can maintain their current ones.

Other interview respondents indicated they had conducted such a survey but participation in the survey itself presented a challenge. One unsuccessful PARTF applicant admitted: "I did find it was difficult to get people to respond, and I didn't know if that was because they didn't want to take the time to mail back, or drop them off, so I had to go a different route for community input." Interview respondents provided mixed reactions regarding recent efforts to implement recreation needs assessments in their communities. One PARTF awardee detailed their process for soliciting public input: "We send our surveys out with the water bill, and handed out in athletic and special events." Because recreation needs surveys are often the most **fundamental component of a parks and recreation master plan**, these planning activities are inexorably linked, and often completed in conjunction with one another. One PARTF awardee elaborated, "Recreation needs surveys were part of the master plan update. We identified what the trends in parks and recreation are in North Carolina currently, and what the residents of our county are looking for from parks and recreation, and use those together to inform choices in the planning process." Parks and recreation trends on a national and state level may not match the makeup of a specific community, so getting insight from residents is fundamental when preparing an application for locally-relevant park development or land acquisition. One unsuccessful PARTF applicant detailed how an encompassing recreation needs survey has allowed for the vision of the community to be executed despite outside influencers:

> "We had an excellent statistically valid needs assessment, controlled and uncontrolled, contracted by __. For controlled we had a 22.8% response rate for the county. For a county of our size, that is in top 3 in return rate in the nation with this survey consultant. National average is 8-10% on county surveys. **One of the things we had to ask the advisory board is to focus on the needs of the people.** Because the recreation bond was passed on property tax, which is rare, and because we had a statistically valid survey we were able to use that information to create a master plan that was fitting and feasible for what citizens wanted. Our number one talking point for parks master plan was 6 of the top 10 elements going into phase 1 were identified by our residents. Special interests group often play a role, so the survey was why we were able to get the master plan to change from what is was in 2013, based on community feedback."

It should be noted that none of the planning resources mentioned above are specifically required for PARTF grant applications (except for mapping and environmental reviews relating to the site). That said, satisfying all of the above planning requirements yields a higher application score, and application scores are the primary tool the PARTF Authority uses when selecting grant recipients. Towns smaller than 500 residents, may not benefit from a comprehensive parks and recreation master plan as the town may have one piece of park land that is fully developed and built out, or perhaps no parks at all. Some local governments may not engaged in planning activities because they are afraid of what the citizen response may be from surveys or public input meetings. Other local governments may not seek planning resources because they partner with other organizations for program implementation. Still others may avoid planning resources because they detract from funding for service delivery, which is frequently viewed as the top priority. On the local government level, allocating resources to one entity typically comes at the opportunity cost of another, as one unsuccessful PARTF applicant explained:

> **"Don't want master plan, we have no use for it-** The question you have to ask is do you update the master plan, or take the money that would go towards that and update the parks, because the programming elements of the master plan are still intact…..We don't require a lot of planning, we have a clear vision, a needs assessment. So when you put other instruments in place to keep you relevant, it may be hard to justify $40k to get it done, when we know the improvements that need to be made already without a plan."

Our results suggest that organizational capacity, though it can be difficult to attain, is a critical precursor to PARTF grant success. But responses also suggest that other factors external to the organization - those that leverage community capacity – may be equally important.

Outsourcing Grant Application Development

Some grant applicants would prefer to outsource some or all of their grant application to a third-party contractor. This may be because a local government lacks the human resource depth to execute application tasks internally, or because professional consulting is preferable for achieving agency goals. A representative from a local government that had never applied for a PARTF grant spoke to that first point: "No, we haven't applied for any grants. We don't have the manpower, we don't have a grant writer, we are all wearing eight different hats, and we are an office of four here. We have actually been in communication with an individual with past PARTF success because we just don't have the time or the manpower here in our little office."

Another PARTF applicant who recently applied for the first time spoke to how contracting out their master plan provided the capacity to apply for the grant, "I don't know how they would have been able to put together this analysis without hiring an outside firm for the master plan."

Even when internal organizational capacity exists in a specific area, outsourcing may still be needed to address specific requirements of grant application, "We have a GIS person here in house, who has helped with trail mapping and park mapping. Again, sometimes it takes a consultant to bring stuff together, you have to see what gifts you have in your toolbox to see who else can help you." An unsuccessful PARTF applicant detailed how outsourcing may be needed, even in a small capacity, "I drew out everything in the park by hand, and took it to a local engineer and he mapped it out because we don't have the programs here to do that on our computers, so that was the biggest cost we had throughout the whole grant process, and that was around $1,000. That was the only thing we couldn't do here." Another grant applicant added, "We do most everything in the application internally. We outsource mapping and environmental review only."

Benefits clearly exist for local governments looking to supplement their current organizational capacity using diverse external resources. As one PARTF awardee explained:

> "We work with a variety of consultants. Try to stay within 3 consulting groups because they are the most familiar with PARTF and have high past success with grant application,

> and know what we are looking for with the required maps, vicinity maps, site specific maps, and we trust their professionalism in getting us the maps the proper way. We try to do everything else in house but outsource maps and a few public meetings to them, to be able to validate our findings as well. We also have staff from recreation departments within the county providing feedback on improvements and direction in moving forward."

A respondent from a local government that has never applied for PARTF highlighted their need for outsourcing has fiscal limitations;

> "We are probably going to have to split, because we can't afford to contract everything. One of the ways we were told we can cut costs is to do the public meetings and survey in house, and they would help us with questions and walking through the process and supplying informative materials, but we would facilitate the public engagement piece. I can probably handle all the internal pieces like citizen engagement and capital improvement plans."

Supplementing application efforts through outsourcing while simultaneously not altering organizational vision was important to one PARTF awardee, "We do and have used consultants in the past. Our last application we contracted out our maps and the rest was done in house. There are some elements of the application I feel comfortable handing off, but I am not comfortable contracting out the entire project."

In some instances, local governments may elect to outsource the majority, or all of a grant application. As a recent PARTF awardee outlined: "It [PARTF application] was not something they could do without an established parks department, it was new to them, so they brought in [name hidden] and had someone help them along, and plan both the site specific master plan for the application and the comprehensive parks and recreation master plan, so they were able to check many of those requirement boxes of the application." The advantages of outsourcing elements of grant applications were neatly summarized by a past PARTF grant recipient:

> "Absolutely, we have worked with a variety of landscape architects and engineers on various projects, and maybe a certain municipality has their preference, I know which ones have expertise in certain areas, and I can very quickly pick up the phone and call them and get answers to questions I would not otherwise have access to because we have

> developed that relationship with certain ones, and they can provide insight and experience in that specific area. Sometimes smaller communities want to use local networks, and that is not always best. I think there are some strong engineers and landscape architects that have done this type of work and you are going to need the design when you submit with PARTF, and most communities don't have the ability to do that themselves—we don't. We definitely rely on them and their expertise. It makes things much more efficient to work with them, because we are always looking at the budget and trying to keep things on schedule."

A diverse and multi-faceted approach to grant applications was also expressed by interview respondents as an important theme of parks and recreation, allowing for impartial viewpoints. Opportunities may present themselves through networking and collaboration to assist with aspects of application development itself, as one PARTF applicant explained;

> "We had a capstone student from [unnamed university] do our citizens needs survey two years ago. It is great to have those research boots on the ground. The reality is, surveys take a lot of effort, so it is great to pass that on and let them develop that. It doesn't hurt to get a fresh set of eyes, and that doesn't mean we have acted on every recommendation, but it has certainly helped with the brainstorming possibility of moving forward. Sometimes you can get so engrained in the narrow path, so that subjective view is very helpful."

High functioning parks and recreation departments may solicit diverse consultants to provide various opinions on how to tackle pre-existing and anticipated challenges, as this PARTF awardee details:

> "I like to brand out to 2 or 3 to get unique and fresh perspectives looking at our programs from a different set of eyes than the same company again and again. Sometimes you get stagnant, and sticking to an initial master plan does not make sense in practice. Sometimes after a few years, things change, alternates course, so having fresh perspectives come in you are not staying with the same stance a specific group began with, and then you can look at alternatives instead of sticking to an initial plan that may now be outdated. Fresh sets of eyes gives us insight into what other communities are doing and how we can serve our community better."

3.2.3. Enhancing and enabling community capacity

Even when organizational capacity wanes, local governments can negotiate many of the grant application challenges by **enabling and enhancing community capacity.** Numerous literary references positioned earlier in this study discuss **citizen-engaged community development** as a crux that the term community capacity is cemented around. Community capacity includes elements of fund development, communication and advocacy, volunteer/civic engagement and management, community buy-in, and partnerships and collaboration (Hall, et., al, 2003; Schuh & Leviton, 2006; Paynter & Berner, 2014). The Western Australian Department for Community Development (2006) provides a concise and relevant description in that regard: "Community capacity building is about promoting the 'capacity' of local communities to develop, implement and sustain their own solutions to problems in a way that helps them shape and exercise control over their physical, social, economic and cultural environments." This definition aligns with the context of this study, placing the impetus on citizens to take control of their various life environments; *becoming not a product of their environment, but instead making their environment a product of themselves.* Community capacity is a continuous process that requires community-led action and local leadership in collaboration with citizen ownership. This bottom up approach to local government puts the power with the people; that is, if they are enticed and willing to engage. As community capacity increases in a community, so too does local engagement, creating a multiplier effect that supports common causes. Community capacity is fundamentally linked to social change – and, as we discovered – grant success.

Citizen Input and Buy-In

Community input is the most important element of community capacity; without it, the guiding principles of a community are established by elected officials and shareholders, not stakeholders. In local government, that philosophy in government tends to result in a depletion or lack in regulation of community resources (Buckley, Singh, Brothers, & McArthur, 2015). An unsuccessful PARTF applicant fleshed this concept out with an example from their recent park planning phase: "Naturally in conceptual designs, many times they are created by stakeholders, those that have money, power, and special interests, and that is exactly what happened, the design did not really ask the average resident what they wanted." That regrettable situation could have been negotiated by engaging the public in the project from the beginning. A PARTF awardee spoke to the value of this approach: "If what my staff and I think is new and interesting,

isn't interesting to the public, they are not coming, so why even do it. It is really important to keep your eyes and ears on your community." By keeping 'eyes and ears' on the community, you are including them in the process as active contributors. Active contributors in a cause can become **change agents**, as one PARTF awardee alluded to:

> "I think public input is the most important. You know I think the worst thing we could be doing is building facilities that nobody wants to use, or that can't be maintained. That is a very big thing in our community, there is a very small maintenance staff, and I don't want to build something that is not going to be maintained properly, is not safe and is not aesthetically pleasing, so I think each project has to have its own value with the public, but also have its own unique citizen input and maintenance plan before it is even developed."

Too often, however, getting citizens to embrace the value or parks and recreation is challenging, as one unsuccessful PARTF applicant mentioned, "I have never put in a grant application at any of the agencies I have worked because I basically didn't have the support. Getting support from the community first is the most important." Another PARTF applicant explained how public engagement in a project can catapult a grant application, "We already own the land, so for us it is getting the community behind us and excited about our projects, and that is going to drive the council and start pressuring them to get the ball rolling." One of the easiest ways to garner public support for a universal benefit like parks and recreation is by asking the public what that service should look like, and trying to implement it. One PARTF Awardee explained:

> "We can sit here and come up with 1000 things we would like to but if it is not what the citizens want, those things won't be utilized and will result in a misuse of county dollars or grant dollars. Everything that we do we take out to the public, we use our needs assessment, do public meeting to continue to build strength of support in the community, so when programs and facilities are implemented or put in place, it is taken care of by the citizens because they have ownership of it, and it is exactly what they wanted so it is utilized on a regular basis."

Community capacity puts citizens at the forefront of the movement, and local government should support those efforts for positive change. Because change is inevitable, so it is the responsibility of the community to facilitate those changes in ways which align with their

community ideals and values. One non-participatory respondent described how building instrumental tools and resources (master plans, surveys and public forums) with the public is beginning to turn the tide in a positive direction locally. “You got to go back to where your community is wanting to go. We need to build the pieces to get to the place we want to be. We are providing a big change here, and that is scary to a lot of people, so how do we do that with care is important.” Consensus regarding development priorities may never be reached, but that’s okay. As one respondents noted:

> “I think it is also the egalitarian nature of parks, not everyone will use them, but you know what, whether I choose to or not, I can. Anything you invest in parks and recreation that belongs to ME. So if you can get people thinking that way, I don’t think these types of bonds are as overwhelming as they seem to be, it is just making sure you do not have any type of other egregious needs that are going unmet.”

North Carolina communities across the state are evolving in the ways they attract and retain residents. Textiles, tobacco and agriculture industries are being replaced with metropolitan cities and corresponding infrastructure. Increasing infrastructure and technology adds additional flexibility in where North Carolina residents can choose to live. More today than ever before, parks and recreation has become an attraction to potential new residents. A never applied applicant continued this thought, “You can choose to live anywhere. You don’t need to have a parks and recreation department in place but you definitely have to have a vision for it—A commitment that this is what we want to do.”

If local governments do not listen to the needs and wants of their citizens, in some cases those needs may be grossly unmet. A PARTF applicant from a small town with recent rapid population growth spoke to how they are actively addressing a major community concern: “Our local population is exploding, and there has also been discussion that some of the recreational services we have are not diverse and inclusive enough, so that conversation is ongoing.” In this case, citizens are making their voice heard. In other cases, there may be inequity, and the local government must step in to make sure all voices and needs, not just the most affluent ones, are heard. “We are the community of haves and have nots. Part of the community is surrounded around a big lake, and those are typically retirees or higher income, and then we have folks that do not live on the lake.” It takes a mutual effort of engaged citizens in their local government and

an engaged government with its constituents to enhance community capacity. This requires ongoing and consistent communication.

Engaging diverse constituents

Local governments should prioritize engaging diverse constituents to ensure the local vision for parks and recreation is equitable for all populations and user groups. It is important for specific stakeholder groups to command a powerful voice in citizen engagement, yet it is equally important to solicit opinions and desires of those whose voices may be marginalized or underrepresented for one socio-economic factor or another. A PARTF applicant described how, through internal planning, they were able to develop a park system that serves all residents equitably, which resulted in high usage: "A park is within a mile of all 4 housing authorities. There is a key priority here because those parks are very well utilized, and we have created sidewalks and greenways to ensure local connectivity." One interview respondent touched on the efforts they are making as a county to identify service gap areas in parks and recreation, and by prioritizing those areas for development first they have impacted the public opinion positively (affectively enhancing community capacity):

> "The most poverty stricken area is the southern portion of our county, so we put our resources there to start with when I got here, we wanted to give that community an opportunity to get outside, so we developed two splash pads in the most poverty driven area. Those parks are utilized on a regular basis, getting the community out where before those parks they did not interact outside. Before, if someone were in that community tearing up a splash pad or park, they could care less, but now that their kids treat the park with respect, we get phone calls at 8am reporting any negative interactions because the community is invested in the park."

Investing in a community is a reciprocal relationship for a local government. By funding amenities that enhance the quality of lives of citizens, a culture of engagement and buy-in can be fostered. Sometimes, the makeup of a community changes quickly and the local government must swiftly adapt to meet dynamic citizen needs. One interviewee contextualized how they are adapting to changing demographics: "Our County is one of the fastest growing counties in NC, and we know that population that is coming in are predominantly baby boomers and they are bringing their parents with them, so ten years ago we were looking at an influx of children and now we are looking at an influx of baby boomers and the elderly." It should be noted that

investing in community infrastructure can also have an unintended adverse effects on community capacity, as a county representative transparently shared:

> "We are trying to build that public relationship back. We lost some of our support with the PARTF grant because it seemed like one community was getting something and the other communities were not. And now it is been 10 years, and that's kind of how it works in a small county, once you get [a state grant], **it is hard to get something else in those people's life term because they age out of our programs**. That is the blowback from the PARTF grant. We built a nice facility but we didn't build it in their area. I think it would be a double edged sword, because the only location in our county for planned development would be in the city, and even if we built something there that would mean a lot of folks would have to travel 30 minutes just to practice."

One common way to reach diverse constituents is through **staff, resources and engagement events that are equally as diverse as the community they represent**, as one PARTF grant applicant highlighted:

> "I think that information on leisure preferences comes out more so in the public meetings as we are asking them directly what they want in their parks. When we provide materials at our park we advertise flyers and information in Spanish and English. Our staff is diverse as well, reflecting the county residents."

Public forums are a great way to solicit feedback from the community because the meeting can come to them, in their neighborhood where they can express their opinions. One PARTF applicant explained how embracing diversity was a priority for their public input process. "We designed our meeting to lend itself to keeping an open mind, to see what fits and what doesn't, have questions, stimulate critical thinking which leads to prudent planning; those are important pieces to really dial in what people are wanting from their community." Another approach to citizen engagement through public meetings was presented by an unsuccessful PARTF applicant: "We had a public meeting as we were going through the master plan, which included several different charts where citizens were asked to indicate what they would like to see and where they would spend time/money."

When the outcomes of a multi-faceted approach to community capacity yield similar results, a local government can begin to form a calculated opinion and plan of action, as this PARTF awardee indicated: "We did 4 public meetings in preparation of our grant application

held at the community center and at the actual park we were developing. We had a high attendance with a lot of public input that backed up the results of the survey." One interview respondent was rightfully weary of forming opinions based on demographic information alone: "We don't necessarily focus on demographics when considering potential developments for grant applications. We more so consider the survey results and the facilities and amenities we currently have so we don't recreate or duplicate those services." A PARTF awardee summarizes the importance of engaging the community directly with this example:

> "In the last two years we have done 10-12 public meetings, not to just meet the grant requirements, but to go above and beyond. We do not want to have just one meeting, we want to have multiple meetings across the county, as to not get one group's input but county wide input. City of XXX and City of XXX Parks and Recreation Departments, allowing us to hold public meetings at their facilities and advertise for us so that we can get a whole different set of clientele to come to our meetings so we can ensure we are meeting as many of the community Parks and recreation needs as possible."

This multi-faceted approach to community capacity building appeared to be the most effective strategy for bolstering support for parks and recreation.

Local government support

In most case, any significant changes on the local level initiated via grant funds must be vetted through local elected officials. Like any government matter, this could entail a simple board approval or a frivolous and contentious affair. As one respondents noted:

> "When you start talking to politicians about matching funds, some will say, gee its free money coming into our community, but then there is the other part that says we don't want to spend it. **Advocacy and political moves have to take place for the match to be available."**

One PARTF applicant spoke to how, even when support is anticipated, the council and the mayor must give their graces, "We are fortunate to have had support on all matching grants in the past few years, but we must get the green light from council before moving forward with any application." The last element of that quote is important to note, because after community engagement has been conducted, organizations should not devote time or resources into procuring alternative funds for a park project that the current regime does not support, regardless of public opinion.

A theme that arose from numerous interview respondents was consistent local government endorsement for parks and recreation projects if it did not require additional local funding. As one respondent noted, “Our County Commissioners push to go after grants funds when available, and **encourage minimizing costs to the community**.” One past PARTF awardee elaborated, “[Town Council] is very supportive of PARTF applications, and we used a Clean Water Management Grant as matching funds, so they really liked that. Any grant that requires a match needs prior approval, so we need their support.” This sentiment was echoed by another successful grant applicant, “When we have used other funding streams to match grants in the past, like Clean Water Management monies or Department of Transportation allocations, it makes approving the project a no brainer for the commissioners and city manager because it is not going to cost the city any capital to add a facility or extend the greenway.”

Local government support does not start and end with city, town, or county councils, however. Just as they serve to enhance organizational capacity, inter-governmental relationships are also key contributors to capacity at the community level. A respondent with previous grant success from multiple funders provided a unique example: “The biggest cheerleader for parks and recreation is our county manager who goes on the radio several times a month to speak to what we are doing with parks and recreation across the county.” Government support can also come from North Carolina House and Senate representatives, whose endorsement and influence has the potential to be far reaching. One PARTF applicant described how endorsement of their park system from an elected official started when the representative participated in community events: “We get strong support from our **county representative**. He comes to some of local activities, and has even been a vendor at some of our special events. He has aided us in the past by submitting letters of support and has always been a big advocate for growing parks and recreation in the county.”

A PARTF applicant summarized this local government support community capacity theme, “In the end, it is ultimately, does the county leadership want to tap into direct resources such as the general fund to make [parks and recreation] happen. There are some elected officials that are more open to it than others.” It take a multi-faceted approach to garner local government support, similar to any relationship, and that support from multiple angles may prove to be invaluable. As one past PARTF awardee shared:

"Our board is very supportive of quality of life, our mayor is a former parks and recreation professional, and is now a law professor, and is very supportive and understands the difficulties of parks and recreation because of her background. Our city manager is also very concerned. It takes a whole town, but I think we basically have everybody on board."

Collaborations and partnerships

Like organizational capacity, community capacity is also strengthened through collaborations and partnerships with the private, public, governmental and non-profit sectors. As one interview respondent acutely remarked:

> "Parks and Recreation champions in our community are **multi-faceted.** The department takes it out to the public. Our planning department is instrumental in helping grow the recreation departments and they are involved with public meeting and citizen engagement. We also have Tourism Recreation in Partnership for the County. We couldn't do it without them."

Indeed, community capacity requires a multi-faceted approach to collaborations and partnerships. Two unique PARTF applicants detailed their diverse parks and recreation champions:

> "Combination of everybody. We do have stakeholders, a very strong cycling community, parental direction interested in opportunities for children, and our local parks nonprofit who has helped in the past with numerous projects including funding community gardens, assisting with grant development, and installing dog parks and disc golf courses. They are basically waiting in the wings if we have a special project we would like to participate in**, we can join forces** with them. And then our recreation and parks commission is very vocal in pushing activities for families and outdoors."

> "We have a good strong parks and rec committee who help with the process of the master plan, and are also becoming more **community minded and engaged with our community events**. We have the XXX Arts council and other community and business groups, and local civic groups, who we rely heavily on for events. As well as main street advisory committee, and everything is so central to downtown they have become really helpful. **So there is support, you have to be able to articulate that to other entities to move projects forward."**

Local governments often partner with state agencies to accomplish their common goals on a regional level. For example, the PARTF grants and NC Trail grants through the NC Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. Other state awarding grant bodies include agencies like the Department of Transportation, the Department of Education, or the NC Games Commission (hunting trails). Another partnership is municipal governments working with the county for shared common goals. Adjacent local governments can also assist a community by providing technical support for grant application processes they have experienced in the past. In other instances, a county may try to facilitate meetings with municipal park directors in an effort to increase communication and collaboration to advance agency outcomes. A representative from a non-participatory local government spoke to why partnering municipalities in the same region is a complicated goal:

> "I am on the east side of the county, they are on the west side of the county and we don't really communicate, and that needs to change, but it is going to take time. We have periodic meetings amongst the parks and recreation directors in the county, we should have more, but more importantly we need to get the municipalities to get more involved and say hey, 'it's not about you, it is not about us, it is about both of us, and if we don't work together it is not going to work."

Local governments can also foster public service comparisons between residents. This municipal phenomenon can bolster community support by incentivizing new leisure offerings. As one PARTF applicant noted:

> "We have seen how PARTF has impacted other communities who have little or want to expand on what they currently have, big or small. Part of that is a **teachable process** in education, so when we were doing our public meeting for our master plan, we always talked about why we would be applying to PARTF and this is what it can do. And our residents were appreciative to know we were pursuing alternative resources."

One grant applicant emphasized how her partnerships and a personal stake in the community over the years have helped enhance her organization's capacity by creating a network of regional trust:

> "I feel free to work with the county and towns, and town attorney, and landscape architects. Part of that is my past with the Council of Government, because I already have those relationships. **We live in the community, and have relationships with the**

community outside of work. There is not a whole lot of organizational friction. Disputes that arise come from trying to appease all departments on a limited budget, but we always work through it together."

Concerted interests in **economic development** are important for local governments to recognize when considering grant applications, because there may be an opportunity for fiscal or other support where interests align. When community capacity for parks and recreation improvements reaches a boiling point, a municipality or county may propose a **bond referendum** for specific improvements. Bonds are often a great gauge of public support, as they often require more than a majority to pass. One interview respondent talked about how multiple interests groups were instrumental in preparing for the bond referendum, and by doing so, created innate support: "We did a bond event, and had the community college design materials, and when you are doing a bond from the government side of things, you can't tell people to vote for, all you can do is inform and educate. You rely on people from the outside to fundraise and do promotion, and they go out and do advertising and things like that that the government can't do-which is limited to just education." Bond referendums are often the impetus for local economic development.

A cornerstone of partnerships and collaboration within a community exists with civic groups, which are essentially a group of people joined together to enhance their community. For the purposes of PARTF and similar grants, endorsement from civic groups is requested. Building and maintaining relationships with these groups is therefore critical for long-term agency success. One PARTF awardee spoke to how they prepare for grant applications in this regard: "Wherever we develop a new park or getting ready to apply for PARTF funding, we work with the civic organizations and the community leaders in that area. We keep the Ruritan in the loop and present to them, and we will hold community input meetings at civic clubs, youth organizations, or churches." Local governments should stay looped in to civic happenings in their community so collaboration can take place when new groups form, of which an interviewee provided an example, "We have begun to work with the XXX wellness coalition, which is a new group that was funded by the Duke endowment." Another interview respondent touched on the numerous civic groups and established entities the recreation department collaborates with regularly:

> "Lions Club, Optimist Club, Tourism Recreation Partnership, Lions Clubs, Kiwanis Club. A lot of civic groups that back us, and we are constantly sharing information and resources with the YMCA, and they are supportive of our efforts as well. Work with schools on a regular basis utilizing their athletic facilities and gyms on a regular basis. We also run our spring games and Special Olympics are held on school grounds, and students participate."

Local government partnerships with nonprofit organizations should not be overlooked either, as nonprofits can apply for funding sources restricted to government entities and enhance capacity for application development. One PARTF awardee praised the high function non-profit for county park and recreation:

> "We also have Tourism Recreation Partnership for XXX County. We would be done without them. They are our **grassroots group** that really helps us, the grants that we cant apply for, they are our 501c3 that can apply on our behalf to keep the department growing. Also that group has active committees like the XXX park committee, which is grassroots project specific, raising funds and awareness a specific project they are invested in moving forward."

Communicating core messages

By understanding the needs of the citizens, local governments can proactively prepare for alternative funding sources when they arise. Those funders are typically looking for a unique project description and justification rooted in how those additional funds can enhance the community. So, while being able to communicate the 'story' behind a project to funders may be the ultimate goal, being able to communicate the community's 'story' to its local elected officials should be prioritized first. As one PARTF applicant jokingly acknowledged: "The parks and recreation advisory board and the citizens are driving this movement. I am just the lowly parks director that tries to follow the citizens and what they want, and what they are willing to support financially." Interview respondents indicated various mediums for influencing political decision makers, but most involved tangible results from the public engagement process. One recreation director highlighted the impact of validating a departmental vision through community engagement has:

> "Often times in the past I felt as though town council thought that what the parks and recreation department proposed was grounded by my interests. I overcame that by

> making sure I wasn't the only one advocating for the project and they heard from residents that supported the project, that they saw the results and outcomes of the survey, and that they heard from the Parks and Recreation Advisory Board. So it is trying to separate what they think is my personal wants and desires, to making sure [council] understand that I want what the community is asking me for."

Another PARTF applicant summarized their community attempts to leverage community support:

> "When you are starting a new park, I know that you have a lot more opportunities for grant money, because if one doesn't exist, it is important to get one there, so you could well on your way to receiving grant money if you are looking to create a new/first time park. For us I think a big thing that helped us, or I hope will help us, is the support of our town, community, and school. The school utilizes our park throughout the year for events, classes are held there and it is generally well used. A lot of people enjoy it now, but we are trying to get the word out you can enjoy this and you may not even be aware it is there, let's get you down there to see what you are missing out on."

Being able to communicate a clear message to elected officials, policy makers, and funding sources is pivotal in accurately representing a community. This accurate representation, a reflection of community capacity, is often what is evaluated in grant applications. One PARTF awardee concisely summarized this theme, "If you are able to articulate why the project is important to a community, and you have evidence to support it, I think that goes a long way in submitting a project that is very palatable to the board."

Chapter 4: Discussion and Management Implications

4.1. Key Capacity Building Factors for Grant Success

Getting grants is not easy. Our mixed method, exploratory study of the PARTF grant process found that, in North Carolina, 83% of counties had earned grants since the program's inauguration through 2017, but 69% had failed at least once in the application process during that time. For municipalities, 34% had never even applied, and 44% had tried and never succeeded. It has been long understood via research in other fields that the grant application process is not only difficult, but costly (Nicholson & Loannidid, 2012; Bickers & Stein, 2003; Gist & Hill, 1984).

We discovered the many ways that municipal capacity, a local government's ability to implement and manage positive change (Hall, 2002; Beaver & Weinbaum, 2012; CMAP, 2017; Gargan, 1981), could be enhanced to address barriers to grant success. The two fundamental components of municipal capacity discussed in this study are **organizational capacity** (Evans, Raymond & Perkins, 2009; Riverbank & Mentor, 2015; McGuire & Silva, 2010) and **community capacity** (Misener & Doherty, 2009; Paynter & Berner, 2014; Evans, Raymond, Perkins, 2009).

The primary barriers to grant success and the capacity building themes that can help local governments overcome them are discussed in more detail below.

4.1.1 It's not (just) about the money

Our quantitative results showed that money (annual agency budgets) and constituent base (a proxy for financial support derived from taxes) are not strong (or, in many cases, even significant) predictors of PARTF grant success. Therefore, despite interviewees' claims that financial resources were the primary limiting factor when it comes to pursuing PARTF grants, the numbers suggest otherwise.

However, research has often affirmed this belief of money as significant when pursuing grants and federal assistance. Woo (2010) found that schools in low property tax per resident areas receive fewer grants. Indeed, fiscal policy does play a role in the allocation of government resources, often prioritizing higher functioning entities despite need (Rodgers, 2008). And while other research has clearly positioned that, "local governments with more fiscal and administrative resources are at an advantage for obtaining numerous intergovernmental grants" (Sprague, Wilson, Cain, 2018), that narrow perspective does not tell the whole story. Grants typically fund a portion of the total capital costs of a proposed project, and should be looked at as

incentive for a local government to invest in its community (Wenner, Jacobs, Wilson, & Newberry, 2006), not as an expense. Grant funds should be viewed as supplemental funds to accomplish agency and community goals, not cash flow. Having sufficient cash flow to fund or match alternative funding opportunities like grants is important, and establishing capacity can assist with exactly that.

Other research shows that while money does matter, so do other aspects of operation and community relations, and that one of the core purposes of competitive grants like PARTF is capacity building (Orfield, Lipson, & Hoag, 2015; Wenner, Jacobs, Wilson, & Newberry, 2006; Wells, Meede, Anderson, et. al., 2016). Burt-Nichols (2013) highlighted how agencies that pursue institution-wide grant proposals and focus efforts on institutional change (like capacity building) benefit both in reputation and budget. In fact, research has shown that the receipt of capacity grants (those that encourage capacity development through application requirements, like PARTF) is significantly and positively associated with an organization's future financial growth (Faulk & Stewart, 2016). In addition, research has also shown that agencies that have received a specific grant in the past are more likely to be awarded that grant in the future, relative to agencies that have never been awarded the grant (Eloy, Svider & Kanumuri, 2014). This phenomenon, referred to as the 'Matthew Effect', is well cited, and important for potential grant applicants to consider as another benefit to navigating the grant process (Bol, Vann, Rijt, 2018; Antonelli & Crespi, 2013) Furthermore, grant awardees with higher debt ratios and higher fundraising ratios have been found to receive lower grant amounts (Ashley & Faulk, 2010).

All of this evidence suggests that undertaking the grant application process can coincide with developing municipal capacity, as accomplishing both has overlapping organizational and community goals and outcomes. It also suggests that previous research has found evidence that fiscal resources are significant in the grant writing process, while other research attests that is not the case, and that primary indicators of success are rooted in elements of municipal capacity instead. Because of this dissonance in literature, we purposefully addressed this specific concept, as it relates to this study, in Phase 1.

By positioning fiscal resources as mostly insignificant in relation to PARTF grant success, we were able to clearly communicate to potential grant applicants that success can be achieved regardless of size and scope, and should therefore be pursued. Municipal capacity helps create an agency's financial, organizational, and community blueprint, which can eventually

recommend municipal funds be used for grant applications. Some practitioners may counter this mentality and say, “But we need money to develop capacity.” It is certainly easy to put the cart in front of the horse in this regard, but it will not be meaningful in finding grant success. Working on enhancing municipal capacity can start immediately within a community with little need for start-up resources, which is one of the primary reasons it should be prioritized. While a lack of financial resources may be an inconvenient excuse blocking many agencies from pursuing grants, it’s not the only barrier they face.

4.1.2 Barriers to grant success abound for local governments.

Our study confirmed many barriers to the grant application process that people perceive, such as a lack in financial resources, a lack in human resources, politics and conflicting priorities, details/documentation/time, politics and conflicting priorities, and grant administration capacity (Shavers, et. al., 2005; Toldson, 2017; Stoecker, 2008). Both organizational and community capacity offer ways around these barriers—ultimately building municipal capacity.

When evaluating barriers to grant activities, the academic world offers some insights. Monahan (1993) found that one of the largest barriers to engagement in grant activities for academic faculty is the inability to dedicate specific time away from foundational occupation duties. PARTF applicants also expressed that maintaining primary services always takes precedent over spending time or resources “for a potential grant.” Much like the parks and recreation field, the academic field faces shrinking private and public funding dollars with increased competition (Boyer & Cockriel, 2001). Studies have shown that barriers for grant application include current workloads (lack of time) and inadequate institutional support (Boyer & Cockriel, 2001; Monahan, 1993). One significant barrier for faculty has been found to be inadequate support available to submit proposals in a timely manner (Walden & Bryan, 2010). A lack in the time or personnel it takes to complete a grant application was repeatedly cited as a constraint.

Another competing grant program, the Department of Education School Improvement Grant (SIG), prioritizes schools which have a high likelihood of achieving a “turnaround,” or shift towards agency goals and student achievement. In competitive grant climates like this and that of PARTF, an agency’s institution play a pivotal role in the process (Yatsko, Lake, Bowen, & Nelson, 2015). This theme was reiterated during interviews, as a lack in local government support, like from Board of Commissioners or endorsement from the mayor, can derail projects

in their tracks. Without institutional support, often generated through internal controls and organizational capacity, potential grant applicants face a significant barrier in making their case to funders.

Some local government representatives indicated that the challenge is not applying for the grant, but implementing the grant if awarded. They also expressed how a lack in administrative support from the grant source is a limiting factor for participation. Previous research speaks to this by arguing that contractual grants (like PARTF) for local governments are not truly equitable when one considers the elements of organizational capacity required for contract management (Collins, Andrew & Khunwisit, 2015). Applying for a grant is one thing, but being able to effectively manage the requirements of a state contract is another. Fiveash (2015) profiles how being awarded a grant is transactional in nature, in that recipients are exchanging money for control. That fear of contractual obligation alone to a state or federal entity is enough to deter participation in the grant process for some local governments.

4.1.3 Building capacity is key to successful navigation of barriers.

As we have seen, municipal capacity building can help local governments overcome many of these barriers. Hall (2008c) discussed how municipal capacity helps explain differences in local government performance, and that measuring capacity helps identify deficiencies to which the community should work to improve. Zimmerman and Tower (pp, 2-5, 2017) discussed municipal capacity in the lens of leisure management, defining it as ‘managing and establishing a variety of organizational concepts, including leadership, finance, community planning, and measuring outcomes.’ This definition integrates key elements of both organizational and community capital well, and is a good reference to understand municipal capacity on a holistic level for parks and recreation.

As we discovered, organizational capital can help an agency implement the internal controls necessary to achieve desired outputs. Community capital can help an agency take those organizational outputs and implement them in the community as positive outcomes. The concepts of organizational and community capacity as they aid in developing municipal capacity are integrally intertwined.

Sharpe (2005) highlighted how a local government’s ability to mobilize financial, human and structural capital (i.e., organizational capacity) to create grassroots volunteer-run organizations can assist the organization’s mission of delivering sport and recreation at a local

level. Having **financial, human, and structural** capacity in place creates enhanced opportunities for local governments to mobilize its citizens. In the context of the PARTF grant application, interview respondents highlighted elements of structural capacity such as having **institutional plans.** These **planning resources,** like a parks and recreation master plan, can help establish the blueprint for managing and maintaining these formal and informal communal networks that aid agency goals.

Another important element of organizational capacity planning resources is an **organizational needs assessment**, which can involve engaging staff, stakeholders, and citizens for input on an organization's structure and process (Evans, Raymond, Perkins, 2009). As local governments should be operating as democratic republics, the importance of catering government services to the needs and requests of its citizens is paramount. These types of organizational needs assessments are usually guided and conducted with assessment tools, such as surveys. Interview respondents frequently referenced the importance of a recreation needs survey as the tool from which organizational policy and positions are formed.

Evaluation of local operations is also an important tool in the organizational capacity toolbox. Evaluation can increase understanding of internal dynamics and allows for an assessment which can later be improved (Evans, Raymond, Perkins, 2009; Backer et. al, 2010). Evaluation can also be used to target if capacity building endeavors implemented by a local government are producing desired results (Faulk & Lewis, 2016; Blumenthal, 2003; De Vita et. al, 2001). Local governments often employ external agencies to conduct these evaluations, like the contractual relations interview respondents spoke to when referencing **outsourcing** important elements of the grant application (Collins, Andrew, Khunwishit, 2015).

A **budget** is a type of planning tool that outlines all proposed projects costs each year, and is typically established well in advance of the active fiscal year through capital improvement plans. Many PARTF respondents spoke to the importance of justifying a potential grant project for inclusion in the **capital improvement plan,** often the first step in setting aside specific capital resources for development. Justification for allocation for these large capital projects within a community can be established through a cost benefit analysis, showing how the project will benefit the community, its partners and other groups (Lee, 2010). Municipal capacity is cyclical in that manner, whereas having organizational capacity like planning resources increases the likelihood of pursuing and attaining grant funds, while simultaneously, attaining grant funds

can further develop and enhance an entity's organizational and community capacity (Brown, 2012).

Perhaps the most common challenge relating to organizational capacity expressed by interview participants is a **lack in human resources**. That certainly makes sense, as human capital is required to accomplish tasks, and more staff should theoretically equate to more accomplished tasks. But for that to happen there must be strong organizational structure and purpose, regardless of an organizations size or scope. Research has shown that focusing on strategic human resource management, including optimizing specific cognitive abilities, understanding employee behavioral characteristics, and applying contextual conditions, is critical to developing an organization's capacity for resilience (Lengnick-Hall, C., Beck, Lengnick-Hall, M. 2011).

With strong **community support,** outsourcing does not necessarily have to coincide with fiscal resources. Expanding on the theme of creating **community capital as an essential element of community capacity**, interview participants reiterated the importance of community buy-in. Suggestions for creating community buy-in that emerged from interviews focused on involving the public in the planning and implementation process of new ideas and projects. Mathie and Cunningham (2003) lays out strategies to create community buy-in locally, including mapping local assets (assisting with parks and recreation master planning process), convening planning groups (holding public input meetings), and building mutually beneficial problem solving relationships, thus transitioning a local population from consuming clients to contributing citizens. By focusing on mobilization of citizens rather than institutional reform, this asset-based community development philosophy positions social capital as an asset for community development (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). That is perhaps the most prevalent difference between organizational and community capacity, in that organizational capacity often corresponds to institutional reform while community capacity corresponds to civic engagement.

If a local government provides resources, offerings, and plans to its constituents – and that government continuously gives local residents a voice in the process - citizen engagement is inevitable. That citizen engagement can lead to community buy-in, fostering networks and partnerships. The human capital established through collaborations and partnerships is what should drive a community to action. Powerful and resolute voices are heard by policy makers and elected officials, and when pressured by the public for a common asset, big projects such as

PARTF grant projects can happen. A grant awardee summarized in detail the roadmap to developing capacity for grant application success, acknowledging challenges and the importance of community and organizational capacity:

> **"If you are starting from ground zero without resources, you need to develop your toolbox before applying for any grant.** You need to understand the general scope of what you are trying to accomplish, and then trying to understand what the citizen base is. Then looking at support from leadership. If you can get those two things together, then you go to the public and say this is what we are trying to do…When I got here, they told me they wanted to build parks and I was gung ho, until I realized we didn't have the right foundation. So we needed to look back and fix these fundamental aspects, these infrastructure pieces first. That is when you go back and update the master plan, figure out staffing issues, etc., and only then you are ready to move forward…I see that [appropriate time to apply for grant] differently as well, and what I mean is seasonality of the year. The PARTF grant is due in May, and my busiest time of the year is spring and fall…The best time to apply is when you know you have come to the point of everybody looking for something new, exciting, different, and you have the funds, manpower, the **DRIVE to do it, and you know people are behind you.** If the community doesn't want it, and they are not using your park, and are satisfied with the way things are, and they don't care, then you shouldn't force upon them that expense because it is their money you are using**. You want to do it when it is the best time for everybody,** and this is the time for us."

One of the most critical components of enhancing the community capacity of a community is by building and strengthening inter-organizational partnerships and networks (Collins, Andrew, Khunwishit, 2015).

4.1.4 The value of collaborations and partnerships.

Collaborations and partnerships are the human capital a community has at its disposal to implement positive change. "**Networks, coalitions, alliances**, and other forms of inter-organizational collaboration are seen as effective strategies for building power to affect broader systems and policy change needed to benefit marginalized communities (Collins, Andrew, Khunwishit, 2015, p.200). Collaborations and partnerships with other local entities are key for local governments struggling to respond to institutional changes in their community (Larson,

Lauber, Kay, & Cutts, 2017) and should exist between entities with similar missions to affect broader change. Past research has shown that one of the most important aspects of state grant opportunities, like PARTF, is to network within your community and at the state level (Wenner, Jacobs, Wilson, & Newberry, 2006). Also important to note, is that grant funding agencies have shown they increasingly prefer to spend money on cooperative and collaborative projects in an effort to maximize the financial benefit to all involved parties (Hamburger, 2013).

The existence of **regional organizations** such as economic development associations or regional economic development districts are linked to significant capacity to leverage federal funds (Hall, 2008c). Regional collaborations were referenced throughout interviews as an important aspect of capacity development for grant success, specifically with mentions of regional park planning committees and county wide recreation coalitions. Regional collaborations often includes **community coalitions**, which are a specific type of community group that can successfully implement community change and stimulate capacity outcomes. Past research shows that the implementation of this 'community coalition action theory' can assist in combatting big picture societal problems (Chavis, D. M., Speer, Resnick, & Zippay, 1993). Linking this theme to PARTF grants, many interview respondents referred to their Parks and Recreation Coalition or Advisory Board as the key driving force in addressing citizen leisure needs.

Developing regional networks of these support organizations can prove to be a valuable asset in the grant application process. Studies show greater community connectedness and deeper communal relationships significantly influence agency ability to acquire resources (Lewis, Jurgen, Jasmine, & Stewart). Developing the **broad network structures** of community support is key for capacity building and grant success, as some interview respondents spoke to civic participation actually developing some, or in some cases all, aspects of a grant application.

The pinnacle of municipal capacity as it relates to collaborative networks may be achieved by local governments or entities that develop such a close relationship with a specific funding source over multiple iterations of awarded grants that were implemented by the awardee successfully, that they become central nodes of the larger network (Paier & Scherngell, 2011). This type of high level municipal capacity ensures development is constantly happening, while simultaneously preparing resources for grant opportunities in the future. At this high level of grant development and municipal capacity, local governments can actually become pass-through

entities for smaller organizations to accomplish their community goals, effectively 'managing' the grants being implemented by another local entity. When expanded to this size and scope, evaluation of funded project implementation becomes increasingly important (Evans, Raymond, Perkins, 2009; Backer et. al, 2010).

Local governments should also invest in **people planning** specifically through partnership initiatives such as establishing citizen councils for specific community issues (e.g. Parks and Recreation Advisory Boards), implementing evaluation tools (e.g., parks and recreation needs assessment), and through the establishment of clear partnership standards (Wildbridge, Childs, Cawthra, Madge, 2008; Department of Health, 2002). Partnerships can help build organizational capacity to plan and write grants, while also helping sustain community capacity and resilience by defining the public message and accurately telling their story. It is important to recognize that partnerships are not just about joining forces for a common goal, but perhaps more importantly a **mutually agreed upon division of labor** (Compassion Capital Fund, 2010). Joining forces is not enough, there should be clear roles and expectations for all participants on the front end.

4.1.5 The importance of leadership and trust.

In almost every circumstance that involves a local government applying for grant funds, there must be **executive level support** from both the city/county commissioners and the lead government official (mayor). Communities containing strong leaders are better positioned to accomplish organizational goals. Without that support for particular projects or endeavors, communities risk misusing local resources. Local politics, and the bureaucrats within it, are an important aspect of municipal capacity, as all local government decisions run through this medium (Gist & Hill, 1984). Interview respondents cited commissioners and lead government officials as two of the most important collaborators for potential park projects. And those local leaders should want to endorse alternative funding measures like grants, as public funding programs increase electoral competition and have been linked to higher levels of constituent satisfaction with local leadership (Mayer, Werner & Williams, 2005).

Financial planning resources, like capital improvement plans, were previously discussed as important tools in developing organizational capacity. Because executive leadership of local government is so instrumental in the budget making process, and approval process of capital improvement plans, their support is critical, especially considering most parks and recreation

updates require significant capital to undertake. Previous public administration research demonstrates the significance of decision making the **county manager** holds, specifically in the budget formulation process (Modlin, 2011). Having local leadership that prioritizes parks and recreation, or other government services like it, comes from a constituent base that clearly expresses those priorities. Modlin (2008) details just how powerful, and sometimes random, the legislative branch of a local government can be.

The role of **county commissioners** in the budget making process is significant, and one way local governments can offset individual bias is by instituting a town or city budget administrator. Developing organizational capacity like this through the addition of human resources can help ensure a more equitable budget making process (Modlin, 2008). Interview respondents reiterated the importance of the legislative branch of local government by stressing they do not pursue grant applications unless leadership encourages it. Leadership and trust are key factors in the grant application process, not just with executive level local government.

We have already discussed the role leadership plays in local government decision making within the grant application process, and how civic leadership through coalitions or purpose driven organizations can enhance grant efforts. It is also helpful to understand leadership for municipal capacity as constructivist in nature, which frames **leadership as community learning**. Lambert (2000) asserts communal learning as the primary function of leadership, and assumes that leadership is about learning for constructive change, that everyone can be a leader, that leading is a shared experience, and that leadership requires a redistribution of power and authority. When framed this way, leadership is dynamic and measurable, while also flexible to institutional influence. It is this type of leadership that is most beneficial for local governments pursuing grant application success, because it is an organic movement that will likely sustain itself. Leadership endeavors that can manage and dictate themselves can be powerful voices in a community.

Leadership capacity research has also approached defining the leadership attributes of an individual or community by quantifiable measures, like consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, citizenship, and ability to change (Dungan & Komives, 2007). One particular study highlighted an openness to change, previous experience, mentoring, and formal leadership programs as significant influencers of leadership capacity (Dungan & Komives, 2007). Interview respondents expressed many of these leadership

influences as well which affect their community's ability to successful apply for grants, like the opportunity to be coached by a colleague who has applied for the PARTF grant before, or a community's willingness to engage in new capital projects, which often coincides with significant change.

Leadership is critical for sustaining organizational and community goals, and is built on trust. The community must trust its representatives, and vice versa, if effective governing is desired. Research has shown that **trust is an imperative feature** in developing organizational capacity (Denhardt, 2002; Cosner, 2009). Trust promotes collective action such as problem solving and decision making (Putnam, 1993), supports conflict resolution (Simons & Paterson, 2000), encourages the exchange of ideas between colleagues and organizations (Lin, 2001), and perhaps most importantly positively impacts team or agency goals (Cosner, 2009). All of these elements of trust are needed for local governments when pursuing grant application. One interview respondent explained how its local government is regaining the trust of its citizens, while simultaneously enhancing community capacity and action:

> "Prior to me coming year, it had been 15 years since any parks or recreation improvement…So in the past two and half years we have implemented splash pads, basketball courts, volleyball courts, walking tracks, passive environmental parks, disc golf course, canoe/kayak launches. We have pursued a lot of different recreation amenities recently and the public is extremely behind us after implementing these things and want to know **WHAT is NEXT.** They don't want to see us stop, they want to see us continue to go. Multiple groups have recently gone before the commissioners and said we have never had anything like this in this county, and citizens are very appreciative of what has been done. Support on social media, and everyone has jumped on board with everything that is going on…. It has sprung people into wanting more recreation, more amenities."

4.2. Recommendations

4.2.1. Recommendations for communities/local governments

Figure 8, derived from our study results, depicts an illustration showing how park and recreation practitioners and their communities might navigate the turbulent river of the grant-writing process, ultimately tapping into this critical funding stream regardless of agency size or financial resources.

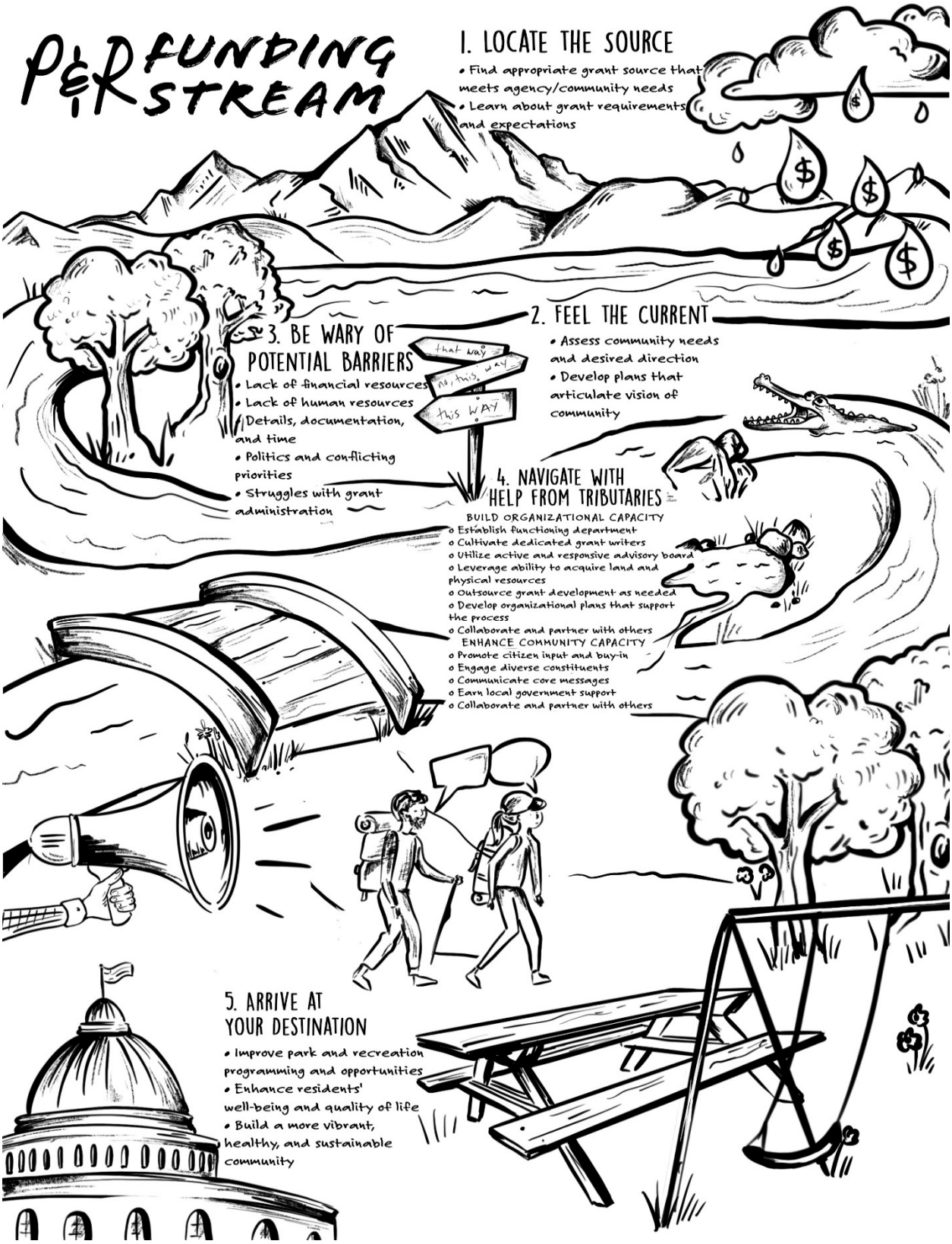

Figure 8: 'P&R Funding Stream'

The following sections outline some specific recommendations for key stakeholders involved in the process, including local governments, grant administrators, and researchers (Table 3). These recommendations are derived from a combination of (a) what participants said, (b) the key researcher's direct experience as a park professional, and (c) recommendations from other literature on key elements of grant application success.

Table 3: Recommendations for the three entities closely involved in this study: Local Governments, Grant Administrators, and Researchers

	Recommendations for Local Governments	Recommendations for Grant Administrators	Recommendations for Researchers
1.	Be willing to engage	Adjust matching fund structure for increased equitability	Examine grant success factors in other contexts
2.	Find ways to optimize local funds	Ensure smaller municipalities are considered for awards	Determine which aspects of the PARTF application are best predictors of success
3.	Have a plan	Reconsider application requirements	Consider other correlates of grant success at the community level
4.	Don't tackle the application alone	Make the submission process more user friendly	Track longitudinal changes in grant success over time (and why they occur)
5.	Know the grant structure and requirements	Provide training and professional development	Identify partnerships and collaborations that are most effective
6.	Tell your community's own authentic story		Explore strategies for procuring other types of alternative funding to support parks—not just grants
7.	Leverage community support		
8.	<<Forge capacity-building partnerships>>		

1. Be willing to engage.

A **willingness to engage** in the grant application process is the first obstacle communities or local governments must overcome. Higher rates of grant application have been linked to higher rates of grant success (von Hippel & von Hippel, 2015), and as one study participant noted, "You have to apply to request funds, and if you are not requesting them you can't get mad when you don't get them." In a study similar to ours conducted in 2016 and using the same success domains for grant applications, the authors found that it was imperative for agencies to distinguish two separate stages of the application process: self-reflection on whether the opportunity cost of investing time and resources is worth the potential grant funds and the selection stage where a funding authoritative committee awards funds (Enger & Castellaci, 2016). In this paradigm, one can never make it to the second step of realizing success if they do not first display a willingness to engage through application.

One PARTF applicant wanted to stress to smaller departments or rural local governments to **give the application a shot,** because they may be more competitive than they initially realized:

> "The trust fund board loves to be able to say what the grants are able to leverage…especially now that the trust fund is a dedicated fund and not from excise taxes. So your ability to present in your application we spent this much…they are not just looking at it from the general assembly point of things, or how many parks and recreation facilities were built, they are looking at the economic side of it. From the perspective of the local builders and suppliers, how much is the project bringing to this community. So I do think overmatching is a big deal. However, in some cases, the trust fund board is very astute, they can look, and I think they do, at the ability of a local government to pay, and whether they have been funded before. You know, the little engine that could definitely gets a second look. If you are building the first parks and recreation facility in a community, no one is going to give that a second thought, and try to find a way to at least partially fund it."

When asked when a local government should apply for a grant, a respondent replied, "There is not a specific time to apply for grants, you should always be pursuing alternative funding because it does not have any negative impacts on the department or community, and if there are opportunities for alternative funds, you should always be going for it."

2. Find ways to optimize local funds.

With the understanding that local funds constitute the bulk of parks and recreation funding, local governments should look for opportunities to **optimize local funds.** A PARTF applicant explained how making grant funds supplemental to a project that is already occurring can be beneficial: "When you are talking about a $350,000 PARTF grant request and you have an approved $2 million parks and recreation bond referendum, that is pretty good leverage…that shows right then and there the community support, so I think that would lean into an application." Another PARTF applicant positioned similarly how **grant funds are a supplemental** resource, not cash flow:

> "I am not going to say no to $50,000, but we need more than that, we need the $200-500k because we are dealing in millions to open phases of parks now, and that is just infrastructure, not the pretty stuff. And that is another issue, they are good about buying land for parks which is awesome, but if you already have the land, you have to put the infrastructure down first, then put the slush money on top of that, or you are going to have issues phasing it because you are knocking people off of open park land. So do infrastructure first, but that does not always weigh out in the PARTF process."

This applicant was talking about how grant applications for site prep or auxiliary facilities are generally unsuccessful because grant funders like to be linked to a spectacle, not a parking lot. The general consensus among practitioners is that grant applications should correspond to big ticket attractions that serve a multitude of citizens. By investing funds and laying the groundwork for development, grant applicants are posturing to grant funders that they are invested in making the proposed project a success. The reality of the situation is that local governments who invest in the process, either fiscally or through capacity development, are usually the ones who get the grants.

A number of interview respondents spoke to **the benefits of overmatch** when applying for grant funds. It is, "Never bad to grease the wheel," as one respondent quipped, alluding to putting more money towards a project than the minimum match required. Another interviewee agreed while adding an insightful caveat: "Absolutely, I have done that a bunch in the past and am considering doing an overmatch for this cycle. But sometimes you just don't have the funds for an overmatch. When you are trying to implement something new in a community that has never been seen before, council may not want to invest more than the minimum; now that they

have seen how the process works in action with recent grants, it makes it easier for me to go for an overmatch the next go around."

3. Have a data-driven plan.

One of the best ways to sell potential projects to funders or elected officials is through the **presentation of timely data.** As a data driven society, decision makers need explicit information from which to formulate their opinion. One PARTF awardee elaborated:

"[Town Council] need data. Their concern is what is the return on investment? For us, it is an easy sell, but we need hard data to back it up. That is when I tell folks you must be willing to ask other agencies for data information if you don't have it. Like those agencies that have applied for PARTF, how is it supported, what does their return on investment look like? Sometimes other resources exist that have that information, but how are you going to prove to your board of commissioners that this is a feasible grant application, and what return on investments have you gained from it. Data. Data. Data."

4. Don't tackle the application alone.

Grant applications can be daunting tasks, so local governments that have never applied for grant funding should reach out to industry peers, state provided technical assistance agency, consultants, regional planners, engineers, and industry organizations for help. Those that have past experience in the grant application process should maintain ongoing relationships and communications with entities that may be able to provide assistance for an element of an application in the future. Alternatively, local governments can **outsource or hire** specifically for a position with an emphasis on identifying and pursuing alternative funding. A past PARTF applicant stressed how important soliciting assistance in the grant process can be:

> "Knowing the time and effort it takes to apply, you really need to have a consultant. It is hard for an individual director to do it, you have got to have committees working on different pieces of the project so that you can put it together, just doing it independently or a small group of people would be very difficult. Those organizations that have full time grant writers have a great advantage. *You cannot hire a grant writer with a job description "and other duties as requested" because grants is all that person needs to do.*"

In some instances, grant programs provide a regional liaison to aid in grant development, as is the case with PARTF. As one interview respondent mentioned, "Working with Recreation

Resources Service, that is a tremendous asset. Having a good open communication with them through the grant application process is so important." But experience in grant development is not restricted to just state employees or contracted services; there may be other local stakeholders or volunteers who are eager to assist in application development if made aware of the opportunity. Keeping an open mind and ear to invested stakeholders can help identify individuals who can spearhead agency goals. For example, one interviewee spoke to how a regional liaison has made application efforts more reasonable, and how practitioners in the field are generally supportive in what is a naturally competitive environment:

> "Having a knowledgeable liaison is extremely helpful in helping local governments through the process. Not all grants have that, and you may be going in blind unless you have someone who has done it before and has experience to walk you through the process, the pros and cons. That is one of the great things about the parks and recreation field, we all want each other to succeed-we are not in a competition that way. It is hard if you do not know what the grantor really wants. I ask for help, and go from there."

5. Know the grant structure and requirements.

Understanding grant application structure and requirements is fundamental to grant success, and that starts by "Reading the application!" Another PARTF applicant echoed: "The most effective strategy for PARTF grant is to read the instructions!" By reading and synthesizing what the application is asking for, applicants are putting themselves in the upper echelon of potential awardees. A common complaint from application reviewers is that the applicants ignored explicitly detailed instructions. Partial credit for missed aspects of an application is rare in the grant world, so missing just one element of a listed requirement often means an applicant receives no points for an entire area of focus. Ass one unsuccessful PARTF applicant explained: "If you don't have all the items it lists, you don't get the points, and won't get the grant. **The devil is in the details."** A PARTF applicant without previous success explained how multiple eyes on the application can help and may be necessary: "We check and double check the application with multiple reviewers, using the application as a guide, because examples are provided in it." Understanding the structure of the application is equally important. That includes which components of the application hold the most weight with funders and should therefore be prioritized. One PARTF awardee suggested the most important part of the application is the cover page:

> "The description and justification tells your story, but it can be hard to come up with the right words so the reviewer can understand and feel it in their heart, that this is a good application and we need to take a good look at it. Sometimes the application can feel like checking boxes, which you have supporting documentation for, but sometimes you can't see the heart of your project unless you say it really well on that cover page. That one page is the heart of it, so you can tell your story and why it is so important to your citizens. Because sometimes the application can't translate that, the application is the nuts and bolts; the cover page is the why."

6. Tell your community's own authentic story.

When projects articulate a clear identity and purpose, supported by relevant and timely data, this can aid in developing this narrative. Applicants might consider the hypothetical scenario of two projects whose application scored the same. If a pot of grant money can only fund one project, the project that appeals to the emotions and values of the funders presumably has an advantage over the other. So applicants should tell their story, and be able to do so convincingly, demonstrating how their project is unique from every other project that claim to 'enhance the quality of life' of their communities. Some might phrase this another way: **be true to your town**. As one PARTF applicant noted:

> "Well we haven't had [grant] success yet, but our application was successful to me because it was written in a way that said we are not fancy, we are not trying to be fancy, and we are presenting this in a true representation of our town: home town, small town, just normal people. We didn't hire some firm to use big words that don't pertain to what we are trying to do. I have read many applications from other communities that was obviously not written specifically for that area and those people, and I really wanted ours [grant application] to read that it is coming from us and not somebody we hired to use their generic wording."

That strong opinion is an expression of passion for enhancing the community through parks and recreation, so much so that particular local government did not want external forces like planning firms diluting their application. There is value in an objective perspective, but when it comes to telling your story:

> "You got to have heart in the project, you must believe in it as well. You can't be a good champion, or write a good application, if you don't believe in the project you are trying to

> have funded. We bring our plans to the county commissioners, if we can prove the citizens are for the project, they will support it. It is hard to write a grant without the backing of the citizens, so if it is a hog barrel project coming from a singular, albeit powerful, voice, then it is hard to make that successful without the data of community support. Every time you write a PARTF grant, you have to believe in the project 110% and know how instrumental it will be once completed, and know how much everyone will enjoy it, and that is a reason you can do a good PARTF grant because you believe in the project. That is why it is hard to contract the application out to a firm."

7. Leverage community support.

Leveraging community support requires engaging with and understanding diverse groups of stakeholders. As one interview respondent explained: "I have been trying to bolster support not only from local officials, but county and state wide representatives that can voice their support, or getting other organizations or nonprofits involved that can endorse the project as well, or speak at one of their meetings to get buy in there as well." Communicating programmatic goals can also create buy-in from the community, as a PARTF applicant noted, "Educating the community on the need and how the product will affect your community, and the ability to show it is needed and wanted within the community."

While diversity is an important component of community capacity, the ultimate goal for local governments in the context of parks and recreation should be to create **equitable opportunities** for leisure. For that to happen, local governments must **prioritize all of its constituents** above all else.

8. Forge capacity-building partnerships.

Forging Partnerships for parks and recreation can stimulate collaborative health outcomes and initiatives, increase physical activity, and promote community togetherness (Springer & Calwell, 2007; Henderson & Bialeschki, 2005). Partnerships do not occur through spontaneous combustion or osmosis; they involve continuous relationship building via strategic horizontal and vertical integration, developing trust and commitment along the way. The roots of partnerships and collaboration are grounded in working together for common community goals. Partnerships can exist in almost any context (e.g., informally, cooperative agreements, joint ventures, alliances), yet Mowen & Kerstetter (2006) posture that partnerships are most effective when there are clearly defined partnership goals that are mutually prioritized, when there is

honest and regular communication, and when there are strong leaders to lead the charge. A PARTF awardee spoke to how partnerships speaks volumes in the grant application process:

> "For lots of reasons, you need to make sure you do it right. You don't cut corners, you make sure you give people what they want, and the community is happy with what you are doing and are supportive. The public pays attention, and that gets translated to how they support the state council and representatives. In addition to the general public community leadership outside the city council is really important, whether its civic organizations, chamber of commerce, economic development people, I think if you line up those entities it comes across in your proposal, because there is value in demonstrating the types of partnerships you can create."

4.2.2. Recommendations for grant administrators

At the end of their interview, respondents were asked to provide feedback or recommendations for the PARTF grant administration team so they can better fulfill their appointed mission in the state. These proposed changes might also help park and recreation agencies successfully navigate the grant process. One overarching theme conveyed by interview respondents was this: across all domains of grant success, **the application process may be equal, but it is not equitable.** That is not to say that funders do not understand the dynamics of capacity; as participants comments suggest, it is presumed they do hold larger metropolitan areas to a higher standard. But must participants continued to assert that inequities in the process needs to be addressed. **Recommendations for grant administrators** were grouped by theme. The following are those themes listed by prevalence:

1. ***Adjust matching funds structure for increased equitability.***

The design of intergovernmental transfers, such as state grants to local governments, is a responsibility of the funder (i.e. state or federal entity) (Shah & Shah, 2006). That is to say, that the responsibility of addressing equity does not fall on the grant applicant, but with the funding source to allocate funds in an effective, equitable, and fair manner to fund recipients. Grant applicants should know and understand how the design of the grant process and corresponding fund transfers operate, which ideally should be framed to understand and accommodate varying levels of municipal capacity (including fiscal), within a large applicant pool, such as all local governments in a state. Roughly half of all suggestions related to changing the matching requirements for the PARTF grants, which can be a significant barrier to smaller agencies with

limited resources. The PARTF grant is currently a dollar for dollar matching grant. These comments ranged from suggesting sliding scales based on population or the local government budget, to specific regions having different tiers for matching requirements.

- "The more and more you look at things, phasing, or **sliding scales usually have to be implemented for alternative funding to be equitable**. *$20 to you may be a lot different than $20 to me,* and I still may be under water even if I am funded."
- "You are not looking at the individual themselves, you are looking at **identifying disadvantages**. If we take the stigma of it, do we want to be equitable or have equality, because equality is not cutting it."
- "I would love to see how the PARTF match is done, putting it on **the tiered system**. Wealthier communities pay the 50%, lower tiered communities pay a 25% or less. **This lower match would increase participation** for these smaller communities that are looking to apply."

2. Ensure smaller municipalities are considered for awards.

Even though phase 1 of this study demonstrated smaller local governments may be more likely to find success with PARTF grants, given they are able to apply, some interview respondents indicated that they thought smaller localities should be considered more often. Other interview respondents spoke to difficulties in executing the terms of the grant when given the opportunity, in part due to lack of institutional or structural support from funders. Struggles grant awardees face during implementation are often exacerbated in smaller local governments with fewer resources (Collins, Andrew & Khunwisit, 2015; Fiveash, 2015).

- "I would like to see local governments receive the grant that do not receive it normally, I know our neighboring town has received several grants in the past few years, and from what I have hear 50-60 apply each year, and I would like to see different people get them, weather it is us or not, then the same that always get them. **Share the love."**
- If you look at some of the very small towns in NC, these places really don't exist as anything other than a pin point on a map, as opposed to a government function. I would love to look at some of those places and see what the county presence is, because that is what they are relying on. They are relying on the county to carry a lot of their load. **It can be done in localities without a parks department,** like ours, but what happened in our

case, is we were awarded the grant, and we said ok….now we chased down this car what are we going to do with it."

3. ***Reconsider application requirements and opportunities.***

Some interview respondents familiar with the PARTF process questioned the need for expensive plans when they only want to implement simple improvements. Other interview participants indicated they would like PARTF funds to be eligible to be used as the fiscal match for federal grants, like Land and Water and Conservation Fund grants. Another common theme among all interview respondents was that more grant opportunities should be available, be it from state sources or other mediums.

- "They need to look at whether all the aspects of the application that are required are necessary. For example, the application asks for a system wide master plan, not something every community is thinking about, but some communities may think why do I need to do all of this if we just want to improve our park. And you need to have money to match, and many communities do not have the ability to match."
- "We would like to see PARTF funds eligible to be used as LWCF matching funds."
- "I think you will find most small communities will say what is PARTF? And other communities may say, yea we have heard of it but **it is too cumbersome**."
- "I would like to see **more opportunities** like PARTF, like the Connect NC Bond grants."

4. ***Make the submission process more user friendly***

Some interview respondents cited the application itself as being too cumbersome or difficult to navigate without assistance. Other interviewees noted that the sheer volume of material required for application is intimidating. Multiple interview participants acknowledged that being able to submit the application electronically would be a huge asset.

- "Electronic submissions are helpful."
- "Make it as simple as possible, user friendly, and put it online."
- "When people look at PARTF grants they are afraid of them because of the amount of information that they ask for, because government requires more paperwork and follow up, more than independent grants we apply for are only one page. Go to the PARTF training."

5. ***Provide training and professional development.***

Interview participants highlighted technical assistance like training and professional development as a common recommendation for grant funders. Some interview respondents alluded to a disdain for the federal grant system because support on the back end is often not available. Other respondents provided tangible suggestions, such as linking local governments that are new to the grant application process with a similar sized community that has experienced past grant success.

- "People don't like putting in for grants if the support is not available on the back in end when questions, changes, or issues arise."
- "Or a resource that can pair you with somebody that has been in a similar situation, that would be beneficial to have someone say, hey your department is very similar to this department who was successful with a PARTF grant, maybe you can invite them down and they can look at what you have and you can get some ideas."
- "Workshops and educational pieces available like at conferences where you can learn from experts are helpful, and I also think a big education piece is if you can check in with Recreation Resources Service, or another entity that can give insight to your particular situation, that has a similar situation."

Finally, the grant application process can also be viewed as a process for enhancing capacity of a community. Going through this process does not guarantee award funding, but it does guarantee a community will be better prepared for alternative funding the next time around. As one unsuccessful PARTF applicant closed:

> "I understand why the [PARTF] authority wants to spread the wealth, but when it comes to funding large projects, it is challenging to be successful. It is hard for our council to understand, that if we ask for $500,000 and contribute a million, that entails a perfect application, it doesn't mean it will be funded. And they will have a really big issue with that and question 'what did you do wrong?' Nothing, this is just the way it goes, you can have every possible box checked, it doesn't mean you are going to get the grant, it is a grant, it is not set aside money for our local government, and that is an education piece that will be very hard for them to swallow if we apply for the grant."

This response underscores a critical point, despite an agency's or and organization's best efforts, grants will never be a truly reliable source of funding. Nevertheless, they remain a critical one – especially for park and recreation agencies.

4.2.3. Recommendations for researchers

This study also highlighted several potential recommendations for future research on similar topics.

1. Examine grant success factors in other contexts.

PARTF was just a case study, but many other parks and recreation grant opportunities are crafted in similar ways. For example, the Tennessee Local Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (Local Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, 2017) has a very similar application to PARTF, as well as a similar funding mechanism (state appropriated parks and recreation trust fund). If a grant were to have similar application requirements with a different matching structure, how would that affect the challenges and success stories of study respondents? The California Office of Grants and Local Services (2017) provides funding opportunities to address parks, recreation and resources, but the applicant pool incudes nonprofits in addition to state and municipal entities. It would be interesting to investigate how increased competition from the non-profit sector affects local governments working to navigate the grant application process.

Furthermore, LWCF (again, the largest federal grant for parks and recreation development) is filtered to the states per their Outdoor Recreation Plan. How state leaders decide to allocate those funds region wide often varies between state lines and acting political parties. If a state already has an application program in place for LWCF, they may find value in replicating that application for any park and recreation-focused state grant programs. PARTF was crafted in the image of LWCF, so parallels of applicability to this study could be prevalent for local governments pursuing both state and federal grants. All of these examples highlight the importance of replicating our study in a different state's park and recreation funding context to compare results.

2. Determine which aspects of the PARTF application are best predictors of success.

Do certain types of projects get funded more often than others? Do smaller communities really have a fighting chance against the Goliaths (i.e., agencies with large budgets serving large populations)? Are certain aspects of the grant application informally (or unintentionally)_ weighted more than others? Answers to these types of questions could help inform the grant design and administration process. While considerable amount of research has been conducted on grant applicants and their capacity to find success, little research has investigated attributes of the funding sources themselves. Fleishman (2007) contends that understanding the funding

source is critical to grant success. Other researchers acknowledge that bias in in government's grantsmanship is an element of grant study that should be further researched (Sprague, Wilson, Cain, 2018). For example, investigating the composition of grant review panels and what the criteria they value the most could prove beneficial for practitioners and researchers alike.

3. Consider other correlates of grant success at the community level.

Our quantitative analysis only looked at budgets and population size (for counties) and population size (for municipalities) because reliable data on other fronts was ot available. Access to more reliable secondary data sources that describe other aspects of each community (from park and recreation budgets to community demographic structure) would help researchers drill down examine other factors that might be associated with grant success. Those factors and correlates could become focal points in future studies of grant success and failure.

4. Track longitudinal changes in grant success over time (and why they occur).

Our quantitative analysis only examined a coarse snapshot of past grant success. It did not involve an in depth analysis of agency successes and failures with respect to PARTF over time – and, importantly, why they occurred. To augment our study, future research could follow specific agencies and their grant application trajectories, noting facilitating (e.g., key partnerships) and inhibiting factors (e.g, primary barriers) that influenced success a different points in time. Furthermore, if an agencies that had perpetually struggled with PARTF finally found a way to break through and receive an award, the strategies for doing that could prove to be invaluable for others facing similar plights.

5. Identify partnerships and collaborations that are most effective.

The value or partnerships and collaborations was frequently mentioned by interview respondents, and examples of these relationships included a wide range of partners in a diverse array of contexts. Future research could try to figure out which of these partners prove to be most valuable, and how those partnerships and collaborative endeavors are structured. For example, Larson et al. (2017) found that partnerships with peer governments/agencies were more valuable than other types of partnerships (with NGOs, etc.) for local governments responding to environmental change. Perhaps the same is true for local park and recreation agencies searching for grant success.

6. Explore strategies for procuring other types of alternative funding to support parks – not just grants.

As indicated in the literature review of this thesis, grants represent just one of the many alternative funding sources for parks and recreation. By studying other ways for park agencies to boost revenue, support programs, and acquire land and resources, , researchers could help agencies identify creative ways to address needs and achieve goals. For example, additional studies of the impact and potential utility of program fees (Dustin, More, & McAvoy, 2000; Crompton and Kaczynski, 2003), entry fees (Cothran, Bowker, Larson, et. al, L., in press), bond referendums (Dolesh, 2012), and non-contractual charitable giving (to name a few) could offer important insights. There is a need for additional research to determine the efficacy of these other alternative funding streams in the context of parks and recreation.

4.3 Study Limitations

Several potential limitations of this study exist. First and foremost, as outlined in the Reflexivity Statement, the lead researcher was someone who was deeply involved with the PARTF grant process as a consultant for Recreation Resources Service. Though objectivity was preserved as much as possible throughout the research process, some degree of subjective bias was inherently present.

Another limitation of this study was the challenge of soliciting participation from local governments that have never heard of the PARTF process. In small communities that lack a major park facility, pursuing grant funds may not be deemed appropriate. However, perhaps pursuing grant funds *is* precisely what these communities need when attempting to expand and evolve recreation and leisure offerings. While we made a concerted efforts to connect with communities who had not engaged with PARTF and had not experienced any past grant success, more outreach could be done on this front.

Grant databases used for this study's quantitative analysis were from the years of PARTF existence at the time the study began, 1995-2016. These were the data used to create the grant application success domains, which also helped to frame selection of interview respondents in the study. By the time this study was complete in 2019, however, some application success domains had changed, as new awards were distributed in 2017 and 2018. In other words, some communities identified "never awarded" had experienced success by the time interviews were actually conducted. Even if an interview respondent had changed domains since the time those categories were established, they were able to provide useful insight into their operations pre/post PARTF award.

Finally, it should be reiterated that the findings here only represent the perspectives regarding PARTF and the PARTF application process of certain municipal and county recreation leaders in North Carolina. Those leaders might not speak on behalf of the whole agency (though they were intentionally selected to do so). Additionally, those perspectives might not apply to other states or other grant process that differ from NC PARTF in significant ways. But we believe they will translate across multiple scales and locales, demonstrating wider applicability. For example, Tennessee has a grant application process for the Local Parks and Recreation Trust Fund. This grant fund and corresponding application was guided in large part by the PARTF. As PARTF is one of the oldest local parks and recreation state funded grants in the nation, many states hoping to implement a similar assistance program look towards PARTF as an example. Furthermore, PARTF was originally crafted with the Land and Water Conservation Fund grant application in mind. Many of the application requirements of the LWCF grant are synonymous with those of the PARTF grant, as the initial PARTF grant application mimicked that of the LWCF application. Overall, despite the case study approach to this research, we believe our conclusions and recommendations regarding the grant-writing process and the capacity-building factors that influence grant success would likely apply across a wide range of contexts.

4.4 Closing Thoughts

> "With obesity and health issues in the United States on the rise, it is crucial to work in parks and recreation to meet the needs of our citizens, and often times we don't on a municipal level have the means to meet those needs; but sometimes we can go to our board and allocate matching funds to a grant application. Without PARTF, 75% of our projects would not occur."

This quote from a study participant highlights the critical importance of grant programs like PARTF and their impacts on local communities. Grants are key to park success, which subsequently influences community development and quality of life. Numerous interview respondents provided first person accounts to support that argument. But the respondents also made it clear that the PARTF grant application process is hard, and local governments face many barriers to participation. Those barriers can be fiscal, and the financial constraints are often perceived to be the biggest challenge communities must overcome. But while it is important to consider costs when pursuing matching grants, our results also show that **grant success isn't**

just about the money. Many other capacity factors play a critical role, both at the organizational and community level.

If local governments approach the process with the right strategies in mind, success is indeed possible. While grant applications have requirements and mandates that challenge local governments in the grant application process, they are also crafted in a way to stimulate innate capacity building through the process. Being awarded a grant may be the desired *output*, but the desired *outcome* of that process should be a local government that has grown its efforts to engage its citizens and its ability to enhance the quality of life of the community. A PARTF awardee elaborates:

> "It is important because these grants support future infrastructure for the county, community and residents. Parks and recreation agencies are built on providing exceptional recreational opportunities for our residents and PARTF is one way of tapping into resources so new resources and infrastructure can come to fruition, thus impacting our residents, and reaching agency goals, strategic plans and objectives."

In other words, the mere act of applying for a grant can indirectly improve a community by building agency capacity, whether or not that grant proposal is funded. The take home message is clear: keep trying! We hope that park and recreation leaders, as well as local government authorities in other sectors, can utilize results of this study to inform their preparation in the grant application process, eventually leading to grant success and happier, healthier communities.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Invitations

Subject: Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Research Study; Sent via Email from kesmit10@ncsu.edu

Dear <contact name>:

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by North Carolina State University about the opportunities and challenges regarding the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant program, a state funded parks and recreation grant. Your participation in this study will assist in better positioning local governments to apply for the PARTF grant, as well as other grant opportunities.

Attached you will find an *Interview Background and Consent Information Form.* Included in this document is a short pre-survey questionnaire which will provide us basic information about your local government prior to the interview. If you are willing to participate in this study, please review the document, sign the corresponding statement of consent, and complete the pre-survey questionnaire. To confirm your willingness to participate in this study, please return the *Interview Background and Consent Information Form* and corresponding pre-survey questionnaire by scanning the document to: kesmit10@ncsu.edu; or by mail to:

Kyle Smith
3024 Biltmore Hall
Raleigh, NC 27695-8004

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and all of your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information or information that identifies your local government will be associated with your responses in any reports of this survey data. Should you have any further questions or comments, please feel free to contact the lead researcher, Kyle Smith of North Carolina State University at kesmit10@ncsu.edu, or at 919.513.6145. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the

Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants Administrator at 919-515-4514 or access the website at https://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/irb/.

We look forward to sharing the results of the study with you and sincerely appreciate your time and consideration for participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Kyle Smith

MS Student

North Carolina State University

Reminder #1

Subject: Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Research Study Reminder; Sent via Email from kesmit10@ncsu.edu

Dear <contact name>:

We wanted to remind you about your invitation to participate in a research study conducted by North Carolina State University about the opportunities and challenges you face in regards to the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant program, a state funded parks and recreation grant.

Attached you will find an *Interview Background and Consent Information Form.* Included in this document is a short pre-survey questionnaire which will provide us basic information about your local government prior to the interview. If you are willing to participate in this study, please review the document, sign the corresponding statement of consent, and complete the pre-survey questionnaire. To confirm your willingness to participate in this study, please return the *Interview Background and Consent Information Form* and corresponding pre-survey questionnaire by scanning the document to: kesmit10@ncsu.edu; or by mail to:

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Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and all of your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information or information that identifies your local government will be associated with your responses in any reports of this survey data. Should you have any further questions or comments, please feel free to contact the lead researcher, Kyle Smith of North Carolina State University at kesmit10@ncsu.edu, or at 919.513.6145. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants Administrator at 919-515-4514 or access the website at https://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/irb/.
We look forward to sharing the results of the study with you and sincerely appreciate your time and consideration for participation in this study.

Sincerely,
Kyle Smith
MS Student
North Carolina State University

Reminder #2
Subject: Reminder of Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Research Study; Sent via Email from kesmit10@ncsu.edu

Dear <contact name>:

We wanted to remind you about your invitation to participate in a research study conducted by North Carolina State University about the opportunities and challenges you face in regards to the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant program, a state funded parks and recreation grant.

Attached you will find an *Interview Background and Consent Information Form.* Included in this document is a short pre-survey questionnaire which will provide us basic information about your local government prior to the interview. If you are willing to participate in this study, please review the document, sign the corresponding statement of consent, and complete the pre-survey

questionnaire. To confirm your willingness to participate in this study, please return the *Interview Background and Consent Information Form* and corresponding pre-survey questionnaire by scanning the document to: kesmit10@ncsu.edu; or by mail to:

Kyle Smith
3024 Biltmore Hall
Raleigh, NC 27695-8004

Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary and all of your responses will be kept confidential. No personally identifiable information or information that identifies your local government will be associated with your responses in any reports of this survey data. Should you have any further questions or comments, please feel free to contact the lead researcher, Kyle Smith of North Carolina State University at kesmit10@ncsu.edu, or at 919.513.6145. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants Administrator at 919-515-4514 or access the website at https://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/irb/.
We look forward to sharing the results of the study with you and sincerely appreciate your time and consideration for participation in this study.

Sincerely,
Kyle Smith
MS Student
North Carolina State University

Appendix B: Interview Background and Consent Information

We are asking you to participate in a research study designed to improve our understanding of the opportunities and challenges associated with applying for the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant, a state-funded parks and recreation grant. We will utilize responses of this survey to assist communities in better positioning themselves to apply for PARTF grants, as well as other grant opportunities. The specific purpose of this research is to:

- Identify how community capacity and organizational capacity influences a local government's ability to successfully navigate the PARTF grant process.
- Identify and describe the barriers to participation in the PARTF grant process for local governments.
- Identify and describe the perceived benefits of applying for a PARTF grant.
- Provide information and recommendations to assist communities and local governments better position themselves to successfully apply for parks and recreation grants.

Research Procedures: Our interview will consist of open-ended questions administered to individual participants and should last about an hour. With your permission, I would like to record the interview instead of take notes, to enhance discussion and assist with accurate transcription.

Risks/Benefits: We do not anticipate any risks related to participation in this research. There are no direct benefits of participation in this study for you, but know you are contributing to parks and recreation research to practice. If you would like a copy of the results of our study, we would be pleased to send them to you upon request.

Participation & Withdrawal: Your participation is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. Should you participate, you may withdrawal at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any individual question without consequences.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential. Your name and identifying information will not be linked with any of the information you provide. Additionally, your locality will not be linked to any information you provide or attached to any published data. Because neither you, nor your locality, will be linked to the information you provide, your participation in this study will have absolutely no influence on any potential PARTF grant applications your local government may submit in the future.

If you have any questions about the research project in general or the interview specifically, you can contact Kyle Smith by phone at 919.513.6145, or by email at kesmit10@ncsu.edu. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a subject in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 919.515.8754 or access their website at https://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/irb/

Statement of Consent: I have read the above information, and have received answers to any questions I asked. I consent to take part in the study.

Your Signature: _____Date: _____

Your Name (printed):_____

In addition to agreeing to participate, I also consent to having the interview tape-recorded.

Your Signature: _____Date: _____

Your Name (printed): _____

Appendix C: Pre-Survey Questionnaire

The North Carolina State University Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism Management is conducting a study of local government's engagement in the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) grant process. Your participation in this survey will help us better understand the opportunities and challenges associated with applying for a state-funded parks and recreation grant. We will utilize responses of this survey to assist communities and local governments in their efforts to better position themselves to apply for PARTF, and similar, grant opportunities.

Please take a few minutes to complete this survey. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your identity will be kept confidential. Your responses will be released only as part of a summary in which individual answers cannot be identified. Please note that participation in this study, and your corresponding answers, will have absolutely no influence on any potential PARTF grant applications your local government may submit in the future.

1. Does your locality have a parks and recreation department?
   □ Yes □No □Unsure
   a. Do you have full-time parks and recreation staff?
   □ Yes □ No □ Unsure
2. Are you aware of the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund (PARTF) Grant?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure
3. Has your community applied for a Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Grant in the past 10 years?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure
4. Has your local government been awarded another grant (other than PARTF) to enhance parks and recreation in the past 10 years?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure
   a. If No, would you consider applying for PARTF or another grant in the in the future?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure
5. Is there a need for alternative funding sources, like the PARTF grant, to supplement tax generated appropriations for parks and recreation in your community?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure
6. Does your local government have the resources and capacity to develop a PARTF grant application?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure
7. Can your local government appropriate the 50/50 matching funds required of the PARTF grant?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯Unsure
8. If awarded a PARTF grant, would your local government be able to implement the project or land acquisition within the grant period of three years?
   ◯ Yes ◯ No ◯ Unsure

9. How difficult is it for your local government to develop a successful PARTF grant application?

   _____

   1 Not difficult at all Extremely Difficult 10

10. What is the perceived impact a PARTF grant could have on your community?

    _____

    1 Not Impactful at all Extremely Impactful 10

Appendix D: Interview Guide

BEGIN INTERVIEW HERE

Interviewee: _____

Date/Time: _____Locality: _____

Position/Role: _____

Notes: _____

Participant Background/Informative

The first set of questions is about your background and familiarity with the PARTF grant process.

How familiar are you with the PARTF grant application process?

- **Can you explain your involvement, if any, with past PARTF grant applications?**

You indicated in the pre-survey that you have/have not applied for a PARTF application in the past 10 years.

- **Can you explain why it is/is not important for your locality to pursue alternative funding sources for parks and recreation like the PARTF grant?**

You indicated in the pre-survey that your local government has/has not been awarded another grant (other than PARTF) to enhance parks and recreation in the past 10 years.

- **If yes, do you find that the PARTF grant requires more or less resources (easier or more difficult) than other parks and recreation grants you have applied for?**
    - How is the PARTF grant easier or more difficult than other parks and recreation grants?
    - Is the PARTF grant more or less valuable to your local government than other parks and recreation grants?
- **If no, why not?**

Community Capacity

The next set of questions relate to community capacity.

What are the physical and economic assets needed in your community when considering application in the PARTF grant process?

******** *Citation: Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, (2016); Wendel et. al. (2012); Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan (2012)*

- **Do you have the necessary land/natural resources to develop projects and increase your parks and open space?**
    - How is land acquisition for parks and open space prioritized when potential parkland comes available?
        - What factors could influence the decision to use land purchased by the local government as a match for the PARTF grant?
            - Does your local government actively seek out these opportunities?
    - Do citizens work with the local government regarding easements for developing parks and recreation projects, or is there resistance?
- **How does your local government and local citizens support efforts for parks and recreation funding?**
    - Does this change when a unique opportunity for land acquisition or development is present?

Can you describe who helps initiate or champion (leadership) from the community level funding for local parks such as applying for a PARTF grant (or another similar grant)?

***Citation: Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, (2016); Wendel, et. al. (2009); Goodman et. al. (1998)*

- **You indicated on the pre-survey that your local government does/does not have a parks and recreation department, and does/does not have full-time parks and recreation staff.**
    - How does this affect your local government's ability to apply for a PARTF grant?
- **Does the city/town/county council prioritize/support applying for parks and recreation grants like PARTF?**

How would you characterize community support and engagement with a local government's application for a parks and recreation grant like PARTF/In the past who has helped prepare and apply for grant application?

***Citation: Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, (2016); Wendel, et. al. (2012); Laverack (2012); Richards & Dalbey, (2006)*

- **What stakeholders in your community can assist with grant application development and submission? (residents, organizations, nonprofits, civic groups, schools, etc.)**
    - How?
- **Does your local government have a parks and recreation advisory committee? If so, describe if they are active and helpful. If not, what other organization/entities might help with PARTF or other grants?**
- **If you have conducted a recreation needs citizen survey, how did the findings inform the grant or what was applied for?**
    - If so, what was the response rate?
    - If not, is this something you have considered?
- **If you have held a public forum for parks and recreation in the past three years, how did the community feedback inform a potential grant application or what was applied for?**
        - What was attendance like?
- **What is the general attitude towards pursuing alternative forms of funding, such as PARTF, for parks and recreation in your community?**
    - Do you think that attitude would change if you were awarded a PARTF grant?

What networks are in place in your community that can aid in grant application development?

***Citation: Matarrita-Cascante, Edwards, (2016); Wendel, et. al. (2009); Goodman, et. al. (1998)*

- **Do you have active relationships with vendors, engineers, consultants, etc?**
    - Have these relationships proved valuable when planning for a PARTF application?

- **How are skills, knowledge, and information that can benefit parks and recreation transferred and communicated in your community?**
    - Formally/informally?

<u>Organizational Capacity:</u>

The next set of questions relate to organizational capacity.

How does the institutional context or readiness of your local government affect participation in the PARTF grant application process?

***Citation: Hall, et. al (2003); Sharpe (2006)*

- **How does public policy play a role?**
    - Legal frameworks
- **Do the demographic attributes of your community influence on your prioritization of parks and recreation development?**
    - Have you been able to identify specific needs for specific demographics?
- **How does the availability of land for development and regulatory constraints in your locality affect your potential for application in the PARTF process?**
- **Have you ever received a grant for a project and the work wasn't implemented?**
    - **If so, Why?**

Are there sufficient financial resources in your community to pursue/develop successful PARTF grants?

- **How does the required matching funds from the local government affect your participation in the grant process?**
- **Would a smaller matching local fund encourage more participation in the grant program?**
- **Would you consider over matching requested grants?**

How does your availability of human resources affect potential participation in the grant process?

- **How does your ability to manage those human resources affect potential application in the PARTF grant?**
- **If you were to apply for a PARTF grant, how would you handle the process (outsource, internally, combination)?**

  - How has this been handled in the past if applicable?
- **Tell me about the opportunity cost of dedicating staff members to generating a PARTF grant application internally.**
  - **Have you found success with this in the past?**

Next, I am going to ask you how various aspects relate to your willingness and interest in submitting a grant like PARTF…

- **Upon completion of a master plan, comprehensive master plan, capital improvement plan, public forums, citizen survey, etc?**
- **When local government agrees to a fiscal match, when land becomes available for development, when the community encourages it, etc.**

<u>Summary of Key Capacity-building Factors</u>

The following questions are fundamental to understanding how local governments approach the PARTF grant process.

What aspects of the PARTF grant application process are the most challenging (barriers to participation) for your organization?

- **How do you negotiate or overcome those challenges?**
- **Is there one particular factor that prevents participation the most?**
- **If not PARTF, what about other grants?**

What factors support or enhance your efforts to pursue a PARTF grant?

- **Is there one particular factor that supports participation the most?**

In your opinion, what are the <u>most effective</u> strategies that local governments can use successfully apply for a PARTF grant?

- **(Where or how have they done a good job?)**

<u>Perceived Benefits of Applying for a PARTF Grant and Recommendations</u>

These final questions address how you believe a PARTF, or similar, grant could benefit your community.

Please describe how a PARTF grant has or could enhance the recreational and leisure offerings in your community.

Do you think that a PARTF grant could bolster community support for parks and recreation?

- **How?**

What recommendations would you have for making the PARTF grant program equitable and accessible for all North Carolina communities?

END INTERVIEW HERE

That is everything I had planned to cover in our conversation. Is there anything else you would like to share on the topic of increasing the capacity of local governments successfully navigate the PARTF grant process?

***Is there anything else you would like to ask me*?**

De-brief

I will be conducting about 30 interviews like this to help identify the capacity building factors that lead to successful navigation of the PARTF grant process, as well as those factors that may prevent participation. Again, I want to stress that this interview will have no bearing on future, past, or potential PARTF applications for your local government. It will, however, hopefully position other local governments to become more successful in their efforts to participate in the grant application process.

Our Next Steps

- Complete interviews (Summer)
- Transcribe interviews
- Analyze results from the interviews and publish results (January/February 2019)