Hitting It Out of the Ballpark and Into the Community:
A Case Study Analysis of the Akron Aeros Community Relations Programs

A thesis submitted to the College of Communication and Information of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

by

Phylicia A. McCorkle

August, 2013
Thesis written by

Phylicia A. McCorkle

B.A., Bowling Green State University, 2010

M.A., Kent State University, 2013

Approved by

Danielle Coombs, Ph.D., Advisor

Thor Wasbotten, M.S., Director, School of Journalism and Mass Communication

Stanley T. Wearden, Ph.D., Dean, College of Communication and Information
# Table of Contents

TABLE OF CONTENTS...........................................................................................................iii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS........................................................................................................iv

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION.................................................................................................................1

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE.................................................................................3
   History of Minor League Baseball.................................................................3
   Dialogic Theory..............................................................................................6
   Social Capital as Theory.............................................................................12
   Social Capital and Community Relations............................................15
   Sport and Community................................................................................20
   Value of Sport and Society.................................................................23

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS.................................................................................................26

IV. METHODOLOGY.............................................................................................................28
   Case Study.................................................................................................28
   Sample.......................................................................................................31
   Data Collection..........................................................................................32
   Analysis Process.........................................................................................33

V. RESULTS..........................................................................................................................37
   Efforts Toward Social Capital...............................................................37
   Dialogic Messages for Communication..............................................56

VI. DISCUSSION.....................................................................................................................62
   Conclusion...................................................................................................66
   Future Research.........................................................................................67

APPENDIX

A. Minor League Baseball League Breakdown...........................................68
B. Interview Guide .........................................................................................69
C. Respondent Identification.....................................................................76

REFERENCES.......................................................................................................................77
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents, Rheuben and Regina McCorkle, for providing constant support throughout my two-year graduate program. This thesis is the result of many tears and stressed out nights but my parents were always available to offer words of advice. Thank you for always believing in me. To the Akron Aeros, I truly appreciate your willingness to open your doors and allow me to spend time learning about your great organization. I would also like to thank my wonderful committee. This process has been overwhelming and challenging, yet you reassured me I was on the right track. And finally, a special thank you to my director, Dr. Danielle Coombs. Without your persistence and faith in my abilities, I would not have been afforded the amazing opportunities and experiences over the past eight months. I am truly grateful for your guidance and never ending support.
Chapter I

Introduction

The relationship between an organization and its surrounding community plays a large role in the level of an organization’s success. This connection is no different when referring to sport teams. Whether National Basketball Association (NBA), National Football League (NFL), or Major League Baseball (MLB), professional sport teams rely on the surrounding community in some way, shape, or form in order to reach their full potential. In the same way, minor league teams must rely on their community for the same reasons. Ticket sales, game attendance, and team record play obvious roles in team performance. However, a strong relationship with the surrounding community is also related to team success. As Babiak and Wolfe (2009) note, “there has been no empirical work examining the factors that motivate professional organizations to become involved in socially responsible activities” (p. 719). This statement highlights the lack of research and information pertaining to such a relevant topic within the sports industry, ultimately supporting the need for a closer examination.

In the same way literature does not address professional sport organizational motivation, it also fails to mention minor league sports teams and community involvement. In fact, literature does not include mention of Minor League Baseball’s unique history and connection with the community. For this research, one Eastern League Minor League Baseball team, the Akron Aeros, Double A affiliate of the Cleveland Indians, will be the source of case study analysis. “Baseball is truly the American pastime, and nothing could be closer to the truth in the Akron-Canton area” (Maroon, et. al, 2007, p. 37).
From being a New York Yankee feeder team in 1935 to being moved from Burlington, Vermont to Canton, Ohio, the Akron Aeros we know today have made several moves across the east coast (Maroon, et. al, 2007). In 1989 owner Mike Agganis moved the team to Canton, Ohio and renamed the team the Canton-Akron Indians. Eight seasons later the Canton-Akron Indians were relocated to its current Akron, Ohio location. During 1996, the city of Akron relished in the arrival of a new minor league team along with the groundbreaking of a new stadium, Canal Park. Agganis initially named the team the Akron Blasts. The Akron Beacon Journal played host to a contest encouraging residents to submit team nicknames, and the Aeros was voted the new team name (http://www.akronaeros.com, 2013). “The name was chosen to honor the history of aerospace in Ohio (which includes being the home state of the Wright Brothers, Neil Armstrong, and John Glenn)” (Maroon, et. al, 2007, p. 41).

This research topic is the result of brief exposure to the Aeros Education Day Program, a program which in-class learning and baseball are used in tandem. This program sparked an interest in learning more about the Education Day Program and other community outreach opportunities offered by the team.

As previously mentioned, there is a lack of information pertaining to the impact of Minor League Baseball efforts to support home communities. The idea of community outreach coincides with the concept of social capital, the framework that will be used to compare and contrast efforts made by the team. Focusing on one minor league team will provide a solid example and analysis of how a team is able to set forth efforts in support of the development and growth of social capital.
Chapter II

Literature Review

History of Minor League Baseball

Minor League Baseball (MiLB) has a storied history with several periods of restructuring and times of distress. Originally known as the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues (NAPBL), it established its relationship with Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1901. Kraus (2003) explains that as the nation’s love of baseball increased and the number of teams quickly grew, the industry became increasingly unstable resulting in the meeting and ultimate formation of the NAPBL (p. 12). The NAPBL was established to protect and represent minor league teams in their relationship with major teams.

The structure of such a league requires explanation as the demand and need for minor league baseball has changed since 1901. MiLB is organized based on leagues with various team classifications such as Triple-A, Double A, Class A Advanced, Class A, Class A Short Season, and Rookie. Teams are then affiliated with a major league organization. Players are placed on teams based on their skill level, and movement up and down classifications is normal. Currently MiLB consists of 19 leagues with a total of 242 teams. League classification breakdown is as follows: three Triple-A (AAA) leagues, three Double-A (AA) leagues, three Class A Advanced leagues, two Class A leagues, two Class A Short Season leagues, and six Rookie leagues. (See Appendix A.) Triple-A acts as the top tier classification of play, “essentially the holding pen for the big leagues from which the majors draw talent when their players get injured” (Zajac, 1997, p. 158). Rookie is the bottom level in which recent high school graduates prepare for college play.
Each classification acts as a place for player development before moving to a more demanding level of play.

MiLB faced a sharp decline in the 1940s partly due to the inability to sustain the postwar boom and the introduction of new forms of entertainment such as television as local broadcasts of major league games that reached viewers within a 50-mile radius became common in 1947 and 1948 (Surdam, 2005, p. 62). More importantly, Kraus (2003) points out how “particularly devastating was the movement of major league teams to traditionally minor league towns” (p. 90). Such movement detracted attention from minor league teams in small towns as the big teams equipped with top players were able to attract crowds. However, minor league teams do play a role in player development and ultimately serve as the pool for potential MLB recruits. So, on May 18, 1962, the Player Development Plan was approved under which the relationship between the NAPBL and the major leagues is governed by the Professional Baseball Agreement (Kraus, 2003, p. 12). Minor league teams were then taken under the wings of their major league counterparts.

The 1980s saw cities putting money into minor league teams. Kraus (2003) states, “between 1980 and 1990, the number of teams grew from 125 to 150, while attendance was also on the rise” (p. 87). The 1990 Professional Baseball Agreement (PBA) was established to govern the relationship between MLB teams and the clubs in their farm systems (Jozsa, 2006). As a result, money was soon allocated toward the refurbishment of stadiums aiding in the newly found interest in MiLB. Jozsa (2006) further explains, “big league baseball teams had decided that their players should perform in modern ballparks with amenities, and on well-maintained ball fields” (p. 51). Minor league teams
made sure to follow suit as “new minor league stadiums provide fans with a variety of concession and novelty stands, clean facilities, family-friendly accommodations, and even luxury suites” (Johnson, 1998, p. 46). Since the 1990s, MiLB continues on a positive path offering entertainment, some economic stimulation and growth in audience appeal, even celebrating its Centennial in 2001.

As for the Aeros, the team has faced both good and bad times. “For their first three seasons in Akron, the Aeros had the highest total attendance for any Double A baseball team” (Maroon, et. al, 2007, p. 41). This is a positive sign for the team being in a new city. In addition to leading the league in attendance, the Aeros made it to the playoffs five out of the 10 years between 1996-2006, winning the championship in 2003 and 2005. Throughout that time, the team continued to move up and down the division rankings.

More recently, attendance has taken a hit. The Aeros continue to draw a crowd but they have declined. Between 2008 and 2009 attendance dropped from 342,816 to 316,836 respectively. An even bigger decline was seen between 2009, again with 316,836 in total, to only 216,563 in 2010 (http://www.milb.com/milb/stats/, 2013). This seems to be related to the role of ownership and lack of interest from the community. Complete focus on the team and commitment to being present at all times are things the previous ownership let fall by the wayside. However, in 2012, Ken Babby became the new owner of the Akron Aeros. With a dedication to reviving MiLB in Akron, Babby is set and ready for many years with the team. Similarly, at the time of data collection, the Aeros were coming off of winning the 2012 Eastern League Championship and experiencing an increased average attendance rate.
Theory

Like any other research, this study will be analyzed using a theoretical framework. Based on the research topic and intended methodology, two theories will be used to frame this research—dialogic theory and social capital.

Dialogic Theory

Communication occurs through various outlets and forms. Public relations relies heavily on the way in which messages are communicated between organization and audience. Kent and Taylor (2002) have taken the lead in the discussion about dialogue. As communication is a key component of public relations, dialogue is the basis for communication to even occur. Dialogue has roots in other disciplines dating back in history and connected to various philosophers. However, in terms of public relations, dialogue is sometimes described as “communicating about issues with publics” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The ability to effectively create and communicate such dialogue is necessary for any organization to succeed.

As previously stated, dialogue is applicable across several disciplines and circumstances. As Kent and Taylor (2002) explain, “what dialogue does is change the nature of the organization-public relationship by placing emphasis on the relationship” (p. 24). Here, dialogue can be viewed as the necessary entity used to build a sense of trust between organization and community. Trust is the basic building block of relationships therefore; once it is in place, organizations and publics are able to begin functioning in a mutual and beneficial way and able to “lubricate the inevitable functions of social life” (Putnam, 2000).

Kent and Taylor’s dialogic theory presents dialogue as an orientation comprised of five tenets: mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment. Each tenet
“encompasses the implicit and explicit assumptions that underlie the concept of dialogue” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Although each tenet and their respective sub-tenets play an equally important role in dialogue, empathy and commitment are most pertinent to the role of social capital within the community. In terms of empathy, organizations must take into consideration the feelings of those they communicate with when creating messages. As for commitment, organizations have to be willing to follow through in their communication with the surrounding community. Both tenets take into consideration the emotional component already involved in communication. In relation to this research, empathy and commitment are best able to guide the relationship building process between the Aeros and the surrounding community.

The first tenet, mutuality, is “characterized by an inclusion or collaborative orientation” indicating the connection between organizations and publics (Kent & Taylor, 2002). With two sub tenets of collaboration and spirit of mutual equality, mutuality highlights the importance of balance in dialogic messages and relationships. Dialogue is not about winning, losing, or compromising, which plays into the sub-tenet of collaboration (Kent & Taylor, 2002). It is about keeping one’s position in mind while being understanding and open to taking other perspective into consideration. In support of this, the spirit of mutual equality ensures “participants in dialogue are viewed as persons and not as objects” free from “using dialogue as the exercise of power or superiority” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). The tenet of mutuality seeks to level the use of the dialogue between those involved. In relation to this research, there must be a mutual understanding not only between those within the Aeros organization, but also and understanding between the organization and the surrounding community.
The second tenet of dialogic theory focuses on a “rhetorical exchange” where “publics are consulted in matter that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 26). Propinquity is based on immediacy of presence, temporal flow, and engagement. The three sub-tenets immediacy of presence and temporal flow, focus on the time in which dialogue occurs. It is important to communicate in the present about issues and remember “dialogue is not rooted only in the present; rather, its focus is on a continued and shared future for all participants” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Finally, engagement in dialogic exchanges is important as “participants must be willing to give their whole selves,” “be accessible,” and “respect discussants” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In terms of engagement and “being accessible,” this is where the Aeros being involved and interacting with the surrounding community should come into play. Engaging with those who will ultimately attend games is a critical aspect related to propinquity. As a whole, propinquity in dialogic exchanges makes certain all publics are informed and aware of any decisions pertaining to them.

Empathy (supportiveness, communal orientation, and confirmation) refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This tenet coincides with the need to remain open and aware of the nature of the surrounding community. Empathetic dialogue “presupposes a communal orientation between interactants, whether they are individuals, organizations or publics” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 27). This sense of connection between organization and the surrounding community emphasizes Ledingham and Bruning’s (2001) work that “today’s organizations cannot operate simply to adapt the environment to the needs of the
organization; it also must act to adapt the organization to the environment” where a sense of empathetic dependency is necessary for success.

Risk is another tenet of dialogic theory. No matter what, some risk is involved in any situation, especially a dialogic interaction. Vulnerability, unanticipated consequences, and recognition of strange otherness are sub-tenet features of risk. Vulnerability is a key feature of risk in that “it is through self-disclosure and risk that relationships are built” where “participants have to be willing to emerge from exchanges as new, changed, and reborn” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). An openness to interaction and sharing of ideas helps create dialogue. The fear of unanticipated consequences and strange otherness should not hold one back from participating in dialogic exchange. Dialogue is unplanned; therefore “spontaneity emerges in the interaction of participants and their individual beliefs, values, and attitudes” (Kent & Taylor, 2002). What may seem like a consequence of risking engaging in dialogue is actually a step in moving forward. Similar to the uniqueness of each interaction, those involved in dialogue have individual characteristics. Recognition of strange otherness allows for different perspectives to marry in a new dialogic experience. For the Aeros, this tenet may prove beneficial in that they are in a position to be completely open to dialogue. Engaging in dialogue with the community will shine a light on the perceptions about the team something the Aeros will need to take into consideration moving forward under new ownership. Risk is a crucial tenet to pay attention to in order to receive such valuable and varied feedback from the community. These elements are what make dialogic exchanges diverse.
The fifth and final tenet of Kent and Taylor’s dialogic theory is commitment. This tenet is based on three sub-tenets—genuineness, commitment to the conversation, and, commitment to interpretation. Each sub-tenet offers a way to approach various dialogic interactions. At a basic level dialogue is “honest and forthright” which is the basis for genuineness in dialogic interactions. This sub-tenet of commitment highlights how “organizations and publics that deal truthfully with one another are much more able to come to mutually beneficial solutions” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 29).

In addition to genuineness, commitment to conversation plays a large role in even establishing dialogue. As Kent and Taylor (2002) explain, “conversations are held for the purposes of mutual benefit and understanding and not to defeat the other or to exploit their weaknesses” (p. 29). Knowledge of healthy conversations will aid in the way that interactions proceed. Taylor’s (2011) research supports the role of dialogic messages, even connecting to the development of social capital. “Although dialogue is premised on an orientation to the other, there also needs to be an individual or organizational capacity to follow through on dialogue” (Taylor, 2011, p. 452). This statement shows the importance of commitment to conversation for successful dialogue. It is not about coming out ahead of others who are involved, but instead making an effort to establish and maintain conversation for the good of all.

The final sub-tenet of commitment, commitment to interpretation, addresses the fact dialogue is different and can be interpreted in various ways and “necessitates interpretation by all parties involved” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 29). Interpretation can be a positive or negative aspect of communication. Involved parties may find it difficult to acknowledge differences in dialogic interactions. Because of this, “commitment to
interpretation also means that efforts are made to grasp the positions, beliefs, and values of others” supporting how dialogue then effectively occurs “when individuals (and sometimes groups) agree to set aside their differences long enough to come to an understanding of the others positions” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 29).

Dialogic theory is the work of Kent and Taylor; however, other researchers have built upon their five tenets to continue the discussion about relationships and dialogue. Bruning has conducted various studies applying the tenets to highlight the importance of communication between organizations and publics. More specifically, Bruning’s research focuses on the relationship between city and community members. For example, the results of Bruning, Dials, and Shirka’s (2008) study suggests, “organizations benefit when public relations practitioners develop programs and initiatives based upon key public member input, interaction, and participation” (p. 29). Such input revolves around the way in which dialogue is used and communication exercised between those involved. Although all five tenets are accepted, Bruning et al. (2008) created a scale based on three of the five tenets (mutuality, propinquity, empathy) of dialogic theory to understand the attitudes and perceptions of relationships and how they affect the organization as a whole. They found these three tenets to play the largest role in creating dialogic messages. A relational approach, grounded in dialogic principles, requires that the organization tailor communication and organizational action to specific recipients based upon relational needs (Bruning et al., 2008). This study emphasizes the importance of considering the five tenets when creating dialogue. More specifically, how can the tenets of dialogic theory be used together or individually to aid in communicating messages to the
surrounding community as the public perception and attitude about the relationship is the result of dialogue used to communicate?

Other researchers have revisited and specifically looked at the function of dialogue (Theunissen & Noordin, 2012; Ledingham, 2001). Whether the importance is on two-way symmetrical communication or dialogue as a philosophical concept, dialogue has numerous functions, including its unpredictability. However, Theunissen and Noordin’s (2012) research does align with Kent and Taylor’s dialogic theory in that risk must be taken into consideration at all times in order to prohibit the “imbalance in the system” between involved parties. In addition, Ledingham (2001) focuses on the government-community relationship and dialogue as being a key component in the function of public relations and community building. “Moreover, the results indicate that managing relationships can impact community, but that such activities must be grounded in a thorough understanding of what is important to public members” (Ledingham, 2001, p. 291). All of this is the result of constant creation of dialogue with a focus on mutual benefit, a tenet of dialogic theory. What must be noted is the recurring idea that the tenets of dialogic theory are evident and necessary no matter the type of communication.

Dialogue is a crucial component of public relations as organizations strive to communicate with desired audiences.

**Social Capital as Theory**

Social capital has the benefit of taking various forms, including that of physical and human. For purposes related to this topic, social capital in human form will be the main form of capital for discussion. Viewing social capital in terms of human capital best fits this research because of the interaction and relationship building aspect of community relations.
The concept of social capital has been around and redefined several times throughout the twentieth century. Early discussions of the concept focused specifically on the importance of community involvement in education. Halifan (1916) was one of the first scholars to use the concept of social capital describing it as:

… those tangible substances that count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. The community as a whole will benefit by the cooperation of all its parts, while the individual will find in his association the advantages of the help, the sympathy, and the fellowship of his neighbors (p. 130).

Halifan points out specific aspects of social capital, differentiating its components from that of other forms of capital. Various researchers then developed other definitions focusing on various aspects, though none made a lasting impression as that of Putnam.

Robert D. Putnam has become the leader of social capital research captured in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000). Putnam’s (2000) work focuses on that of social capital referring to “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). Over time, the way in which people interact with one another has declined, resulting in little communication and relationship ties to those in their very own communities. More specifically, “the last several decades have witnessed a striking diminution of regular contacts with our friends and neighbors” (Putnam, 2000, p. 115). This is the basis for *Bowling Alone*, a look at the shift in community makeup and interaction.
In his book, Putnam addresses all aspects and opportunities for community engagement including political, religious, informal, volunteering and philanthropy, workplace, and civic connections. Each type of engagement is the basis for community development and growth. Jarvie (2006) affirms, “social capital is a factor that contributes to higher levels of civic voluntary activity and in turn such activity enhances democracy by offering citizens greater choices and opportunities” (p. 334). However, throughout the twentieth century, our society has experienced a decline in the level of social capital and interaction indicating a society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital (Putnam, 2000). Putnam’s take on social capital encompasses various aspects of society and community. Depending on the type of interaction, the state of its existence varies. Informal social connections are a key area in which engagement has faltered. From meeting up for a drink to gossiping with next-door neighbors, informal social interactions have declined in the volume, breadth, and depth. This shift in societal makeup highlights the importance of such interactions, an area in which researchers are concerned. The title of the book is derived from the discovery that people are now satisfied with doing solo activities, such as bowling alone rather than in a league.

Putnam’s take on social capital specifically revolves around interacting with those in the community. As previously mentioned, this concept has been applied to other areas of study such as sociology, politics, and a continued application in education. A common theme throughout is “being seen as a way of contributing to social inclusion” in some form (Jarvie, 2006, p. 336).
Coleman (1988) is another key researcher in the study of social capital. His work looked at social capital as a way to build upon human capital. More specifically, Coleman (1988) analyzed the importance of family dynamics in relation to the pursuit of education saying, “both social capital in the family and social capital in the community play roles in the creation of capital in the rising generations” (p.109). With Coleman’s study, social capital is viewed as a component of the creation of human capital both inside and out of the family.

On the other hand, not all researchers agree with the basis of social capital. For example, Herreros (2004) believes the biggest hurdle in the creation and fostering of such capital is the lack of trust. He explains that his definition of social capital “does not consider preferences of expectations as form of capital, only obligations of reciprocity derived from relations of trust and information derived from participation in social networks” (p. 17). He acknowledges how people must be aware of the role of trust as a key feature of social capital, which, in turn, requires reciprocity. The role of trust ensures those involved are willing and able to depend on others. It is important to trust the sincere reasons for participating in community-based interactions. Without trust, the level and type of participation in any sort of interaction will waver.

For the purpose of this research, social capital will be operationalized as “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, p. 19, 2000). By utilizing this definition ultimately all research and analysis will be placed within this framework ultimately most pertinent to sport.

**Social Capital and Community Relations**
As researchers have defined and refined social capital, the concept continues to revolve around the role of building relationships within the community either individually or through organizations.

With any research, definitions of keywords specific to the topic at hand must be clearly defined. For the purposes of this research, community relations will be defined by Ledingham and Bruning (2001) as, “an overall strategy that not only supports the business interests of an organization but also contributes to organizational efforts to meet its responsibility to support the welfare of the community” (p. 528). The overarching goal is to maintain a relationship between the organization and the community in which it resides for mutual benefit. Community, in general, is “signified by a feeling of closeness and camaraderie with a group of other people, usually geographically proximate, who are not necessarily related through kinship” (Smith & Ingham, 2003, p. 253). By defining community relations and community in general as such, data collection and analysis have parameters for comparison. More specifically, these definitions provide a guide for understanding how data aligns with the major ideas at hand. Where social capital seeks to bring the community together, encouraging interaction with fellow community members, community relations also seeks to foster the relationship with the surrounding community for the benefit of all. No wonder a connection can be made between social capital and community relations, an area of public relations.

During the 1800 and 1900s, the shift in technological and industrial developments marked the beginning of public relations. Early examples of community relations sprang up based on the need to create positive reports and stories for organizations steadily growing in a time of great change. Organizations were aware of the impact of
technological and industrial developments. Ledingham and Bruning (2001) note, “as a part of that effort, many corporate leaders were encouraged to establish libraries, foundations, and other community-supportive initiatives to serve as the basis for favorable press reports” (p. 528). By appealing to the media organizations believed they would be able to gain the necessary support, regardless of final treatment of the surrounding community.

Over the course of several decades, a shift has occurred calling into question the nature of corporate intentions in relation to the treatment of the surrounding community. It has been argued the “corporate mindset pays more attention to immediate instrumental interests than to the future well-being of the corporations themselves and the environment in which they operate and that is vital to continuing corporate survival” (Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001, p. 55). Corporations long focused on and operated under an “us” mentality unconcerned with society as a whole. In turn, the ability to successfully conduct business was hindered due to the lack of cooperation from the community. An understanding of the nature of corporation’s work is needed for the benefit of the community. It is true the nature of the relationship is “symbiotic,” where both parties involved, the surrounding community and the corporation itself, depend on the other to be successful. Moreover, as Ledingham and Bruning (2001) assert, “community relations influences loyalty toward a sponsoring organization by community members (p. 532). Without such support, neither the corporation nor the community as a whole feels the mutual benefit.

As this research focuses on sports, community relations specific to that industry must be discussed. Professional sports teams have access to valuable budget money and
resources, both advantageous, that can help the surrounding community. They are able to shell out more money because of their ability to work with large budgets and their professional status. However, as Hardy, Barcelona, Hickox, and Lazaro (2006) state, “too often community relations becomes a hodgepodge of initiatives lacking clear objectives or attempts to measure impact” (p. 51). Instead of pushing the community forward and fostering strong relationships, community relations programs have focused solely on the team’s image. Community members and consumers are aware of the impact a sports team can have on the area and expect such support.

A key feature of sports teams and their community relations programs has to do with determining internal versus external goals. Sommerfeldt and Taylor (2011) touch upon the link between organization and the external community at large but in a more general sense. As Gaschen (2000) asserts, “the community owes us nothing. We have to earn its respect” (p. 10). The external community must believe and feel they are considered a valuable asset to the sports team as a whole. Instead of being considered a means to an end, “American consumers have high expectations that local business, sports teams, and athletes will support local causes and charities” (Hardy, et al, 2006, p. 51). In order to receive the same support, sports teams must work from the ground up, starting with small local organizations before branching out to larger organizations, to demonstrate their willingness to act as a citizen. Working from the ground up, teams are able to show appreciation to the most important audience—the surrounding community.

For sports teams, building capital is based on physical, human, and social capital, but the larger question is “whether sports teams can help build social capital in their community” (Hardy et al, 2006). In order to build upon such social capital, a commitment
to giving time by putting forth visible effort is most important. This respect comes in the form of the long-term involvement with the community. As Hardy et al. (2006) states, “an externally focused program would have clear outcomes that indicate the extent to which the program builds community assets or capital” (p. 52). Time is the biggest motivating factor in the success of strict community relations programs as a way to build social capital. Instead of just player autographs and appearances, sports teams must be willing to interact with the community and build relationships over an extended period of time. Hardy et al (2006) best explain the steps to implement community relations programs, “if a sports organization—team, league or conference—is serious about community building, then its goals, objectives, and outcomes should be somehow worked into its vision statement, mission statement, and strategic plan. Otherwise, community building will be marginalized” (p. 56).

Connecting public relations with Putnam’s social capital is still fairly new. However, Luoma-aho (2009) has done work toward piecing them together. Several parallels can be drawn between the two concepts where “Putnam’s theories are important because they are able to explain the deeper meanings of relationships for not only individuals and organizations, but also society at large” (Luoma-aho, p. 237). With this, social capital can be viewed as a positive perspective and approach for public relations to adopt. In a study conducted by Sommerfedt and Taylor (2011), they sought to analyze the social capital of public relations departments and how it may affect the organization’s ability to participate in building collective social capital in external environments. A key component of this revolves around effective internal social capital and communication within the organization. As Sommerfedt and Taylor (2011) state, “public relations can
help build social capital outside of the organization as well as providing access to the linkages that allow the organization to benefit from a network of resources available in the community at large” (p. 199). Because public relations is based on relationship building, Putnam’s theory has the capability of ensuring both internal and external communication, paving the way for social capital “the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly” (Putnam, 2000, p. 288).

**Sport and Community**

Sport has the potential to shape a community in a unique way. Whether winning or losing, the excitement surrounding a professional sporting event can be enough to bring a community together to support the home team. Dietz-Ohler (2008) point out, “for those with a deep psychological attachment to a team, emotions such as enjoyment, happiness, satisfaction, and anxiety can fluctuate dramatically depending on the success or failure of the highly-valued team” (p. 107). These emotions are the result of various aspects surrounding the fan experience. Several studies have been conducted that focus on fan motivation to not only attend games but return and remain loyal (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995, Heere & James, 2007). Wann’s (1995) study provided a base for understanding fan motivation listing eustress (positive levels of arousal), self-esteem benefits, escape from everyday life, entertainment, economic factors, aesthetic qualities, group affiliation, and family needs as the eight categories for motivation. Each category plays a role in how fans view teams and desire to attend sporting events.

Loyalty is another important emotional connection surrounding sports. Heere and James (2007) looked specifically at the formation of fan loyalty based on external identities. The results of their study found fans’ loyalty is influenced by the way in which...
sports teams and organizations “successfully represent one or more external group identities” ultimately “strengthening team identity and team loyalty” (Heere & James, 2007, p. 332). Although Wakefield and Sloan (1995) highlight team success as one determining factor for loyalty, personal connections are equally as important. Teams that are able to represent the external identities of geographic, ethnic, sexual, and social class have the ability to connect with fans on deeper levels, encouraging them to remain loyal to a relatable organization. As Smith and Ingham (2003) note, “an important selling point for the general public to buy into the purported benefits of the relationship between public and private is the establishment and/or maintenance of a community identity” (p. 258). A sense of community has the ability to prolong and support the success of a team. Smith and Ingham do highlight the need for professional teams to re-evaluate their roots and ability to grow is based on the surrounding community.

In addition to research about fan motivation, other studies followed suit to further grasp the idea of the fan experience. Fans revel in the experience that is a live sporting event. Johnson (1998) states, “for the baseball fan, minor league baseball provides the opportunity to watch the game up close and to identify future stars” (p. 52). Catching a game featuring the next big star in an intimate setting personalizes the experience for fans making them feel like a part of the athlete’s future. In fact, researchers began looking at and identifying the importance of the stadium environment because “spectators who are loyal to the home team are likely to want to spend time at the stadium and return, primarily due to their desire to see the team play” (Wakefield & Sloan, 1995, p. 159). Teams have recognized the importance of including community members in the game “through marketing efforts and promotions, and other events held at the stadium” (Kraus,
Using community figures such as the mayor, newscasters, and radio personalities as a part of giveaways draw fans to the ballpark in hopes of receiving the night’s free gift. In addition, a longstanding connection to the team built over time keeps fans coming back game after game, season after season. Clearly, then, the location and in-game activities play a role in the fan experience as does the team’s success.

Although sports are influential, issues arise involving the economic responsibilities placed on the community and its citizens. The most notable issue is whether or not communities are able to host and support a new sports team. This issue has become the downside in the debate related to the economics of sports in the community. As previously mentioned, sport teams can aid in community identity but at what cost as “the false bond between a sport franchise and the city in which it plays its home contests” are at odds (Smith & Ingham, 2003, p. 258). A team might use the city’s name but this does not guarantee a strong team and community relationship. This relates to the debate about paying for teams and their stadiums with taxpayer money as the “capitalist team owner and the public official appeal to this sense of community when it comes time to build a new stadium or refurbish an existing one” (Smith & Ingham, 2003, p. 259).

On the other hand, sport teams and their stadiums have been found to provide a sense of connection between fans in the community and the team. In their study about sports stadiums and community self-esteem, Eckstein and Delaney (2002) note, “many people told us that sports represent the shared norms and values of their community in class and race differences disappear when cheering for the home team” (p. 238). Here class and race are related to the external group identities outlined by Heere and James.
(2007) in that, “fans no longer perceive the team and their surrounding community as different entities-they are perceived as being linked together” (p. 321). Sporting events are able to break down class and race differences while simultaneously allowing fans to feel connected to the team and others at the event. From this, the negative connotations surrounding building new stadiums in the community are still debatable based on a study that looks specifically at sports stadiums and community self-esteem.

**Value of Sport and Society**

No matter the level of skill or form, sport plays an integral role in a community and society as a whole. The ability to interact and connect with others based on the “shared sense of enthusiasm for a common passion can generate a certain sense of community” related to the basis of social capital (Putnam, 2000, p. 113). Tying back to the minor league baseball experience, “the local ballparks create what is truly a family atmosphere with intense play on the field from future big-league stars and rehabbing current stars mixed in with fun and games between innings” (Maroon, et al, 2007, p. 8). This highlights how no matter participating or being a spectator, sport allows people to connect in ways that will improve the overall community atmosphere. More specifically, “this can lead to greater cooperation and a higher level of unity and social cohesion within those communities” ultimately helping develop and foster social capital (Heidary, et al, 2012, p. 119).

When discussing the place of sport in society, the connection to societal values is important to consider. Snyder and Spreitzer (1989) present various aspects of the role of sport in society. For purposes of this research, understanding the value of sport and the way values are represented is at the forefront. “Sport as a social institution permeates and
mirrors many levels of society; thus suggesting that sport provides a means of expressing some of the dominant values of a society” (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1989, p. 44). Similarly, Eitzen and Sage (2003) bring the discussion of sports and societal values up to date stating the “relationship is interdependent because societal values affect the kinds of sports that are played, and the motivations for participation in them” (p. 45).

On the other hand, Marjoribanks and Farquharson’s research (2012) looks at the value of sport through a sociological lens with the argument “while sport is certainly influenced by its societal context, sport also has an impact on that context” (p. 215). Based on its place in society, we are able to see how sport is capable of shaping our world. As Marjoribanks and Farguharson (2012) state sport can aid in ways such as “nation building processes, and also has significant potential in relation to policy initiatives toward social inclusion” (p. 215). We give as much value to sport as it gives value to society, providing a place for issues to be addressed on a big stage.

The value of sport is often looked at through different lenses. Whereas Eitzen and Sage (2003) look at “widely held U.S. values,” such as success, competition, progress, materialism, and external conformity, Snyder and Spreitzer (1989) look at the “various ways in which sport serves to magnify and accentuate the value orientations of the larger society” through statements, printed material, and the idea of a hero. Both sets of research call to attention how sports are perceived and the applicability to society. The results lend themselves to the notion whether or not we pay attention, sports play a large role in the makeup of our lives and the inner workings of society.

This literature review provides a look at the current research and information related to social capital, dialogic theory, and the place of sport in our society. According
to much of the literature, there are both positive and negative aspects of sport in our society. The key is determining how the positive can be utilized to aid in relationship building through the community.
Chapter III
Research Questions

The literature review plays an extremely important role in any research. After analyzing information related to social capital, dialogic theory, the value of sport in society, and community relations, a lack of specific findings bridging the gap and connecting sport to social capital was revealed. Such a gap further supported the need for a case study analysis focused on one team and their community relations programs. In addition, varying opinions about the true power and place of sport in society are reasons for conducting this type of research. The analysis of a team’s plans and commitment to the community seems to be the best approach to uncover new insights about the topic at hand.

This research seeks to provide a complete case study analysis of the Akron Aeros community relations programs highlighting the important role MiLB teams can play in communities with respect to the importance and growth of social capital. In addition, presenting elements that work both for and against a minor league team’s community relations efforts are outcomes to be analyzed.

RQ1: In what ways do the Akron Aeros embody the idea of social capital?

a. What activities and/or initiatives are in place to foster a sense of connection between the organization and the community?

b. What do the Akron Aeros hope to accomplish based on implemented activities and/or initiatives?

RQ2: In what ways do the Akron Aeros create dialogic messages to aid in the level and nature of efforts toward social capital?
a. In relation to dialogic messages, what value do the Akron Aeros place on community relations and relationship with the surrounding community?
Chapter IV

Methodology

Denzin and Lincoln (as cited in Jackson, et al, 2007, p. 23) state, “the aim and function of qualitative inquiry is to understand the meaning of human action by describing the inherent or essential characteristics of social objects or human experience.” From this, we can understand the basis of qualitative research. It is about using human responses and actions to better explain specific experiences.

Not all qualitative research relies on theoretical framework to inform research; however, the literature review leads to dialogic theory and social capital as two theories best able to inform the research. Both theories are able to help understand the case study and the overall environment of the Aeros as a MiLB team. Using dialogic theory and social capital will help provide a direction for understanding and analyzing the collected data. Qualitative methods are the basis for this research and, as a result, this research will be referred to as a qualitative case study.

Case Study

One way to analyze data comes in the form of case study analysis. As a research strategy, “the case study is used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin, 2003, p.1). Such phenomena are evident within this area of research as events and activities related to minor league baseball differ from its counterpart, Major League Baseball. Because of its place within the world of sport, minor league baseball has the capability to do and provide more to surrounding communities, building on the level of social capital.
As Yin (2003) states, case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed […] and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (p.1). The context of this research falls within such reasoning for case study analysis as I seek to explore the nature of community outreach programs and how such programs are viewed by those in direct contact of programs implemented by the Akron Aeros in relation to the foundations of social capital. Case study research falls under the qualitative research umbrella, which “aims to understand the myriad meanings that people make” (Brennen, 2013, p. 22).

Performing case study research relies heavily on research design comprised of five components: (a) a study’s questions, (b) its propositions, if any, (c) its unit(s) of analysis, (d) the logic linking the data to the propositions and (e) the criteria for interpreting the data (Yin, 2003, p. 21) The main purpose of the research design is to clearly identify and lay out the means of the entire process. A focused design not only helps in preparing for data collection, but as Yin (2003) states, “also helps avoid the situation in which the evidence does not address the initial research questions” (p. 21). Single-case research design allows for a more in-depth look at a specific case and its components along with the aim of “understanding the myriad meanings that people make” (Brennen, 2013). The Akron Aeros are the best choice for this case study as they presently promote and implement a variety of community outreach programs, a key component in the overall selection of the team.

Focusing on one specific program, the Education Days program, seemed to be the best option when determining the level and importance of community relations within the Akron Aeros. Although gearing research toward one program seemed optimal, it proved
to be too narrow, leaving out other significant programs in place by the organization. An all-encompassing scope will give the best representation of Akron Aeros community relations, increasing the probability of uncovering evidence pertaining to my specific research questions.

With case study analysis as the main research design, the process of interviewing is used as a qualitative method of data collection. Jackson, Drummond, and Camara (2007) explain qualitative research as expounding upon the function, nature, and importance of such an approach including the place of interviewing. They state, “interviewing is a set of techniques for generating data from individuals and/or groups utilizing structured, semi structured or unstructured questioning formats” (p. 25). No matter the format, interviewing will provide first-hand responses necessary for analyzing attitudes and levels of success in relation to Akron Aeros community relations programs. Brennen (2013) adds, “some of the information accessed through interviews helps to broaden our knowledge base while other information may also help us to understand alternative points of view” (p. 27).

Interviewing will play a significant role in the data collection process. Although there are a few different ways to approach interviewing, this research will rely on a semi-structured interview question format with pre-set questions asked of all participants. Structured interviews follow a definite format and ensure specific questions will be asked and answered. However, there is “much greater flexibility with semi-structured interviews” allowing interviewers to “ask follow-up questions to delve more deeply into some topics or issues addressed, or to clarify answers given by the respondents (Brennen, 2013, p. 28). A semi-structured interview guide was created and used based on the notion
interviews have the potential to stray from the guide as it is my role to “encourage authentic, useful and in-depth responses from each respondent” even if questions are not pre-established on the interview guide (Brennen, 2013). (See Appendix B.) Interviews were recorded via voice memo to transcribe and reference for analysis.

**Sample**

The research sample for this study is that of a select group of participants directly connected to the Akron Aeros and community outreach programs. (See Appendix C.) More specifically, this research seeks to gain insight from the Akron Aeros Office Manager and Community Relations, Assistant, Suite, Picnic and Community Relations Coordinator, and a Group Sales Representative. Each employee plays a vital role in the creation and implementation of such community relations programs and events. The work of each employee coincides with the overall goal of the organization.

In addition to employees within the Aeros \((n=6)\), non-profit organizations that participate and sponsor community outreach programs \((n=4)\), and area teachers who have implemented the Education Days curriculum into their normal lesson plans \((n=3)\) were interviewed. Each sample group provided a different point of view in relation to the community outreach programs, a key aspect of pursuing such research. The decision to extend the sample outside of the Akron Aeros ensures a broader perspective of the nature of programming and events implemented by the organization. As Brennen (2013) informs us, “qualitative interviewing is less concerned with data collection and instead strives to understand the meanings of information, opinions and interests in each respondent’s life” (p. 28).
Data Collection

In order to gain insight about the role of community relations to build social capital, those with actual connection to the work are the obvious sample for such information. Structured in-depth interviews with said employees and outside participants provided first-hand feedback to the role of building and maintaining a relationship with the surrounding community. In addition to the role of social capital, these employees had the potential to shed light on the creation of dialogue and messages for the community. Understanding the importance of dialogue to aid in increasing social capital is a key research question.

Along with structured in-depth interviews, participant observation within the sample was used as another form of data collection. Brennen (2013) describes participant observation as being “fully integrated into the culture being studied, striving to understand the meanings of actions within the community from an insider’s position” (p.165). As Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain, “Observations put researchers right where the action is, in a place where they can see what is going on” (p. 30). Sometimes being in the environment observing all of the interactions and events that occur can provide more information than an interview. Observations focused on the behaviors, interactions, and feedback of those in the various situations, which are listed and explained throughout this section.

In order for such data collection to occur, a rapport must be established from the very beginning. Because of the nature of desired data and, in most instances, sensitive information, the process of building and cultivating a relationship with one organization for participant observation proves difficult yet possible based on persistence. Luckily, the
Akron Aeros were willing to participate in any way possible related to the goals and research questions this topic entails. The organization was open to participant observation. As a result, the ability to participate in meetings related to community outreach program planning, attend various events and mascot appearances, and spending time at the Akron Aeros main office working alongside employees was approved. These situations offered ideal opportunities for observation. A glimpse into the inner workings of such organizational activities will add to the analysis of Akron Aeros community outreach programs. Brennen (2013) affirms this stating, “when researchers and participants share the same goals for a research project it is clear that rapport has been established” (p. 164).

**Analysis Process**

Once the sample was determined and research began, data became top priority based on coding. Charmaz (2006) describes coding as, “naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data” (p. 13). Coding allows for the main ideas to be pulled out “defining what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means” as well as a way to “organize data so they are malleable, allowing you to manipulate them as ideas and categories develop” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 13; Richard & Morse, 2013, p. 151). Although new ideas can emerge and be extracted from the data, the process of coding only continues until a specific concept or concepts continue to present themselves, becoming redundant. It must be mentioned there are various ways to code data—word by word, line by line or incident by incident. Whichever way of coding is selected should be continued throughout the study. Incident by incident was used for this research.
Just as coding allows for the formation of main ideas and concepts, memoing also aids in the overall process. Corbin and Strauss (1990) inform us “memos are not simply about ‘ideas.’ They are related to the formulation of theory and its revision during the research process” (p. 422). Writing memos “begin as rather rudimentary representations of thought and grow in complexity, density, clarity, and accuracy as the research progresses” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 118). Memos act as a way to think out loud and make sense of the coded data. Researchers are able to discuss their frame of mind, ideas about the direction of the study, and whatever else in memos. Often thought of as notes, memos are a more in-depth reflection of the analytic process required for such qualitative work.

The above mentioned research design and methodology was conducted over the course of eight months beginning in October 2012 and ending in May 2013. To begin, structured, in-depth interviews took place in various locations throughout the Akron, Ohio area with Aeros employees, outside non-profit organization participants who have previously worked with the Aeros, and teachers who have participated in the Education Day Program. In total, 15 interviews were conducted using the interview guide for relevant questions. (See Appendix B). Interviewees included Aeros employees ranging from all levels within the organization, top to bottom. As for non-profit organization participants, interviewees represented two different organizations with strong connections to the city of Akron. Finally, Education Day Program participating teachers represented four different schools—three in Akron and one in Kent, Ohio.

In addition to in-depth interviews, hours were spent at the Aeros office and outside as a part of participant observation. Orbit appearances are an important
component of visibility therefore three Orbit appearances were attended at different Akron area community events. Organizations often reach out the Aeros to request Orbit’s presence at their events. Events included art fairs, family health fairs, and speaking engagements featuring the new owner. As for in office, 40 hours were spent shadowing employees and sitting in on meetings as additional participant observation time. Interacting with those directly connected to the team and those outside added a different, more personal elements to the overall data and results. Being able to witness reactions and hear comments first hand offered a level of richness and depth to the research process.

A third component of participant observation is that of attending three Aeros games including one of two Education Day games. During games, attention was given to how fans expressed their mood and level of excitement, pre-game activities, staff involvement and visibility throughout the ballpark, interactions with Orbit, and the overall feel of being at a MiLB game. In the same way, attention was given to the organizations participating in fundraising events as the Aeros have opportunities for outside groups to collaborate with the team during home games.

Finally, various materials related to the Aeros and outside organizations were analyzed. The most important pieces for analysis were interview transcripts. After each interview, the recording was transcribed then coded based on evolving concepts. It was important to keep running notes about the concepts in order to know how to proceed with future interviews. With this research, interviewee responses helped inform the direction of interviews and offer additional questions for the interview guide. In addition to interview transcripts, pieces of literature explaining the non-profit organizations were
analyzed. This type of literature was beneficial as it offered insight about the types of organizations that collaborate with the Aeros and allow for connections, if any, between them. Lastly, the curriculum from the Education Day Program was also looked over during the analysis process.
Chapter V

Results

Months of interviewing and participant observation paved the way for providing insight into the Aeros’ community relations efforts. Respondents offered feedback in similar areas and topics. Participant observation lends itself to the idea that many Akron area residents are aware of the MiLB team, but the extent to which they are aware of their efforts toward community relations varies.

Efforts Toward Social Capital

The main focus of this research revolved around efforts in an attempt to develop and then increase the level of social capital within the community. RQ1 asked in what ways do the Akron Aeros embody the idea of social capital. Respondents offered various opinions related to the creation of social capital, but three key concepts that evolved from the data in relation to RQ1 encompass the importance of relationship building: sense of care, acting as the cornerstone of the community, and sense of pride.

Sense of Care

When asked about the relationship between the Aeros and the community most respondents pointed to of strong leadership as vital in fostering such a connection. More specifically, a present and visible owner plays a role in how the community views the team’s efforts toward relationship building. “The new owner has a passion for this industry and this community and wants to be a part of this community,” said R3. Not only being interested in making money but also providing an enjoyable experience for fans is included in such a present and visible owner. “He’s fostering that relationship not
only outside but literally inside the ballpark,” explained R4. This relates to the owner’s interest in reaching out to community members and even interacting with fans for feedback during games. “He just wants to talk to people” (R4).

In addition to being visible, respondents mentioned a sense of care for the future of the organization by the owner as a key component in terms of working toward a relationship. When asked about impressions or recent information heard about the new direction of the team R10 responded, “I know there is a new owner who is proactive about being in the community. He’s also working with the staff on new events and things coming up.” News about the owner was circulating in the area, drawing attention to the efforts being made to reestablish a relationship with the city of Akron. R6 added, “The owner is big on the community and reaching out. There’s effort in the community and in here [the office].”

Included in the sense of care is a willingness to invest money to improve the stadium and create a better experience. All respondents mentioned the installation of a new multi-million dollar video board as a key indicator of a new sense of change for years to come. A new owner putting a large amount of money into the stadium within the first few months is a viewed as a great gesture toward a better future.

With these results, a recommendation can be made to best utilize such valuable information and feedback. Impressions about the owner and new direction of the organization are important; therefore, it is recommended to continue scheduling and offering opportunities for the new owner to speak and interact with the surrounding
community. As respondents mentioned the owner’s own desire to talk to people, this should be capitalized on. Visibility will go a long way at this time and into the future.

Cornerstone of the Community

A second factor that evolved from the data focused on the Aeros being a minor league baseball team. Respondents pointed to a hometown feel and access as the top two capabilities toward relationship building as a MiLB team. More directly, “minor league baseball teams especially are the cornerstone of the community,” stated R5.

In terms of hometown feel, many respondents mentioned the more intimate experience of attending an Aeros game. From the concession stand prices to the smaller ballpark, attending an Aeros game feels more personal for fans. R10 shared: “The Indians have a much bigger stadium. The Aeros have a wonderful stadium—child friendly, clean, and easy to get in.” R5 expounds on this notion stating: “I believe ballparks are magical. We’re giving people a break from their lives. It’s something when you walk into a minor league baseball park.” Fans are able to take in a baseball game in the downtown area of their city and interact with others all while creating a sense of camaraderie.

In addition to a professional game, fans are treated to various giveaways and other in-game activities. Such activities are unique to MiLB teams due to the “lack of red tape” involved in the approval process during the game and on off days. For example, trivia quizzes, food eating contests, and bobble head giveaways occur during games. As for after-game and on off-day activities, the Aeros sponsor movie nights on the field, Boys and Girls Scout outings, summer baseball camps, and participate in city-wide parades. Activities such as these are not always possible with MLB teams. “If it’s fun, do it,”
explained R3. “If you’re giving something away, give it away no strings attached.”

Offering fun prizes and team-related items are a bonus for MiLB teams. R2 adds: “We can go wild and crazy with events and promo stuff. It’s something fans talk about. It’s excitement. Contests get fans involved have a feel and say in the ballpark things. Interactions with fans become their own.” Fans are able to relax while also enjoying “wacky” activities to maintain a high level of interest throughout the ballpark.

Respondents discussed the ability to enjoy a professional game with the chance to see rising stars before the majors as a reason for attending an Aeros game. This falls in line with the idea of accessibility. Fans are able to get player autographs, sit close to the field, and see the future stars of tomorrow. By the same token, two other respondents offered the idea of players being positive role models for children stating:

Sports figures are uniquely positioned to do that [give back] because you already have young children who want to play ball and they’re looking up to someone who is a role model to them. We want our children to look up to sports heroes that are positive role models. (R7)

Sports provide a place for people to come to see these players on the field and see them following their dreams. It helps foster a place for kids’ goals; a safe place. (R4)

The chance to see players up close and personal at an Aeros game offers young fans a glimpse into the world of sports and the hard work required of players in order to follow their dreams. An opportunity for learning is present.
Results related to being the cornerstone of the community allow for two recommendations. First, the staff should take a step back and assess the current status of the organization as a way to move forward and achieve the desired goals under the new ownership. It is important to be aware of the reasons behind events or activities as they relate to the overall direction for the future. Granted, it may be difficult to conduct on a constant basis but a periodic assessment would be more impactful than nothing at all. In addition to goals specific to the organization, a look at the structure and purpose of MiLB today would serve as another source of guidance. Keeping the end in mind will help ensure the Aeros continue working as a valuable asset to the community.

Not so much a recommendation, recommendation two encourages the Aeros to carry on with being a groundbreaking MiLB team, offering new and exciting activities and events on and off the field. This will not only boost the team name across the Eastern League but will also call attention to the city of Akron itself. The team carries the city in its name; therefore, positive connections to the organization will benefit the team and the city at the same time.

**Sense of Pride**

A final factor from the data in relation to efforts toward social capital is the role of staff in providing a quality product. Respondents pointed to the pride felt working for the organization as a top reason for being able to provide a great baseball experience:

We can’t control the players. We can control the fun, excitement they [fans] feel the moment they get out of the car to the moment they get back in their car. That’s
what we pride ourselves on. … Do something you love so it doesn’t seem like work (R3).

This sense of pride seems to be more evident as the staff has a more direct relationship with the surrounding community. Here, sense of pride can be viewed as a contributing factor related to community relations. Based on an organization and the relationship with the surrounding community, pride is revealed as a component in successful community relations. Being able to interact and reach out to fans on a more personal level added to the sense of pride in providing an all-around positive experience for the community. R6 adds to this sense of pride, stating, “when that bond comes together, it also translates into the way in which we interact outside [and] how much we want to be out there promoting the organization.” The ability to actually interact directly with fans, “being able to get out there and talk to families” (R4) promoting the organization, relates to the decreased number of barriers between the team and the community.

Other respondents offered similar sentiments about the pride felt in doing such work, including “being able to marry love of sports with interest in food and beverage service,” (R4) “fascination with the other side of baseball—putting on a show,” (R6) and “enjoying the people I work with” (R1). A personal interest in sports was given as a major reason in pursuing a job in the sports industry. Working for a MiLB team like the Aeros marries the passions of several respondents.

An interesting piece that evolved from the data in connection to staff pride revolves around the hometown connection of many respondents. The sense of pride is coupled with the hometown connection. R1 discussed the importance of hometown
people within the organization as “everyone has a personal vested interest” and “wanting to make it work because you know how much it will mean to yourself and the community.” It seems a deeply rooted connection to the city in which the organization is housed plays a role in the way staff views their work. A connection can be made to social capital in that trust is evident. The staff is concerned about the presented product. Fans and community members should comfortable knowing the staff is “all in” ready and willing to do what is necessary for a fun, family-friendly MiLB experience. This realization will aid in the overall relationship building process.

In addition to pride, monthly staff volunteering opportunities also impacts the quality of product being offered. Volunteer opportunities ranged from serving at soup kitchens to serving via the United Way. The Aeros staff takes advantage of giving back to the surrounding community. It was revealed how the implementation of volunteering helped improve staff relationships:

We have to have a good relationship. When that bond comes together it also translates into the way in which we interact outside. How proud we are of this organization. How much we want to be out there promoting the organization. (R6)

As the staff volunteers in the community, they promote the organization and take the teamwork skills to the ballpark on game day. “We need to be seen in the community,” said R3. It was revealed the staff is required to volunteer once a month and some even sit on civic and organization boards. “We’re in the center of downtown Akron so we need to do our part,” reiterated R4. “Get out there and be involved are our most important forms of community relations.” None of the respondents were opposed to the volunteering
requirement giving way to the idea that such outside work is beneficial to the overall
culture of the organization.

Recommendations related to sense of pride directly involve the staff. As
discovered through the interviews, many staff members are Akron hometown natives.
Because staff members are proud of their work and the team they work for, this should be
acknowledged. A small addition could be made to the in-game activity schedule allowing
for recognition of a hometown staff member per game or every other game. This brief
announcement would not only highlight the strong connection to the city, but also show
appreciation for the staff and their hard work. In addition to hometown features at games,
using the Aeros Facebook page (discussed in-depth in late section) to share staff member
biographies and pictures of monthly staff volunteer outings. Pictures are a great way to
document the time spent helping the community but also the perfect way to share with
the public.

It seems both recommendations would ultimately complete the circle of showing
how concerned, supportive, and dedicated to the surrounding community and city the
organization really is. Fans would get an idea of the people behind the scenes who
continue to provide a MiLB experience for them day in and day out.

RQ1a asked what activities and/or initiatives are in place to foster a sense of
connection between the organization and the community. RQ1a revealed the specific
community relations efforts by the organization.

The Aeros have various activities and events in place to interact with the
surrounding community such as Charity Begins at Home, Diamond Ball, Education Day
Program, and even appearances by the team mascot, Orbit. Respondents emphasized the need for such activities as a way to get the Aeros out in front of people to keep the organization top of mind. In addition, such opportunities ensure that connections continue being established and fostered with other organizations throughout the area.

**Diamond Ball**

Diamond Ball is a fundraising event for interested community organizations. Participants sell tennis balls before and during games. At the end of the game, those who purchased tennis balls are able to toss them into hula-hoops on the field in hopes of collecting a prize. Participating organizations are able to keep the profits from sold tennis balls. As a past Diamond Ball participating outside organization, R10 shared:

> Fundraising is a pivotal role to get information about your organization out to the public. Diamond Ball works for us because they’ve allowed us to bring in information and pamphlets about us. Fundraising has allowed us to get a much more public knowledge of who we are and what we do.

The Aeros open their doors creating a partnership that not only draws people to the ballpark but also helps participating community organizations raise money. Although one respondent mentioned never hearing of Diamond Ball before reaching out to the Aeros, R9’s interest was piqued after witnessing the event at a game and hearing from a family member who participated with another group. “We were interested in partnering with other local groups. The Aeros are huge” (R9). The Aeros have been involved with other organizations and events similar to R9’s focus therefore Diamond Ball felt like a great fundraising and relationship-building opportunity for them. R9’s organization is family-
based so collaborating with the Aeros, an organization striving to connect with families, benefits both sides.

Just as outside organizations are able to raise funds through Diamond Ball, they are also able to educate a wider audience about their goals and mission. R10 shares, “Diamond Ball works for us because the [Aeros] allow us to bring in information and pamphlets about us.” It brings people to the ballpark, a bonus for the Aeros, and at the same time allows participating groups to raise money and reach a new demographic. It is a chance for organizations of all sizes to share their work with a new audience in a fun, interactive way.

Diamond Ball is a unique way for community organizations to collaborate with the Aeros and raise money at the same time. It is recommended the Aeros increase awareness about the program and community group participation. More specifically, the Aeros should incorporate more information about how to get involved with Diamond Ball on their website and on Facebook. Utilizing these communication channels will aid in increasing awareness about the fundraising opportunity. Along with information geared toward Diamond Ball, attention should be paid toward encouraging participating groups to share pictures and feedback about their experience via Facebook and Twitter. The more direct feedback from participants as opposed from the Aeros themselves, the better in proving the credibility and success of Diamond Ball. There is an opportunity for increased communication, interaction with community member and fans, and brand awareness through Diamond Ball. More importantly, the sharing of such feedback aids in the relationship building process with the surrounding community.
**Education Day Program**

The Education Day Program provides an Ohio State Standards-based curriculum as a way to motivated students to become interested in learning. Baseball is incorporated throughout the curriculum, which covers all subjects: reading, social studies, math, science and citizenship. Area teachers are encouraged to download the curriculum to use in their classrooms. As the program has been in place for several years, teachers look forward to incorporating activities into their lesson plans. The curriculum is updated every couple of years to stay abreast of changes in the educational landscape. The idea that “baseball is education” plays a pivotal role in promoting the program. Although it has only been in use 2006, the curriculum has already made an impact in MiLB. As R6 shared: “A lot of other minor league teams do this program. The depth of our [Aeros] curriculum is one of the best and biggest.”

Teachers who have participated in the program have varying opinions related to the curriculum. As R11 states, “the curriculum fits in with the standards we have to abide by for the state of Ohio but it’s hard to adapt everything.” R11 adds, “anything that has to do with the game and putting it into the curriculum is neat and different.” Teachers acknowledge the benefits and uniqueness of the program’s curriculum. However, because of state guidelines, it is difficult to incorporate all of the fun activities into daily lesson plans.

On the other hand, R12 completely disregards the curriculum and focuses on the program as more of an “end of the year reward and send off for 5th grade students into middle school.” Although the way in which teachers use the curriculum varies, “we
[Aeros] want to highlight what we’re doing this season, show how rewarding the program can be, [and] how we are trying to grow and add to the program” (R6). Ultimately there is an understanding and appreciation for the program but the way in which it is used differs depending on teacher and student capabilities.

In addition to the curriculum, participating schools are able to bring their students to one of two designated Education Day games as the culminating piece of the program. The program allows schools to purchase tickets for a reduced price. With each ticket, students receive a free brown bag lunch to enjoy during the game. Not only are students able to experience a baseball game, these specific days are perfect for promoting the team early in the season, according to R1. A ballpark filled with students enjoying in-game activities while exploring the various concession stands and learning stations is actually a sight to see and experience. For clarification, learning stations are tables arranged the ballpark concourse. Local companies and organizations are able to present and share information with students. Past learning station participating companies includes the Akron Zoo and other Aeros sponsors. Learning stations are another way for learning to be incorporated with baseball, emphasizing the “baseball is education” idea.

The main recommendation for the Education Day Program revolves around collecting feedback about the program from participating teachers and principals. Based on this research, the teachers have valuable thoughts and ideas related to the curriculum and program in general that would be beneficial for the program’s future. Whether it is a quick survey at the game, a link sent via email, or individual interviews, feedback is necessary for upcoming seasons.
A second recommendation relates to the overall learning component at the game. Although there are learning stations in place, more interactive activities can be organized to really emphasize the education portion even at the game. For example, quick worksheets or learning based games related to baseball could be arranged around the stadium concourse. Although it is baseball and students are there to enjoy the game, such recommendations will take this program to the next level and allow the education component of the program really shine through as a worthwhile opportunity for schools to participate in.

The third and final recommendation is simple: in-game acknowledgements of featured schools. More specifically, the Aeros could use the Education Day Program to encourage learning, as “baseball is education” but also offer special contests with winning schools being featured on the new million-dollar video board. In terms of contests, the school with the most students in attendance, the school with students who read the most books over the course of the school year, or teacher submissions for students who excelled using the provided curriculum. By including such in-game acknowledgments, students will feel special and engaged with the game, teachers will see the Aeros focus on the education portion of the program, and most importantly, the care placed on interacting and providing a fun experience for students will shine through.

**Orbit Appearances**

Mascots become the face of a team. Children are able to identify with and find comfort or uneasiness in furry mascots at games. The Aeros are aware of the importance of a visible mascot in the community. According to R4 and R5, new ownership placed focus on increasing the number of Orbit appearances. At the time of data collection, R4
shared: “With new ownership, I was given the opportunity to offer free Orbit appearances. We’ve done over 100 appearances, so visibility in the community is huge.”
The increased number of mascot appearances is viewed as a way to let the community know the team is here and ready to make a difference. From YMCA events to holiday craft bazaars, Orbit is available and visible at various events across the city. During Orbit appearances, community members often mention seeing Orbit at other events. Although one respondent was only familiar with Orbit after attending games, R9 shared previous encounters with the mascot at other events, supporting the team’s desire to remain visible in the community. “It’s a nice way to show they are interested and care” (R9).

Supporting the idea of visibility, R3 states: “We make sure we have a great experience. Orbit’s face never changes. He’s always there.” If team players or staff members are not personally able to be in the community, Orbit is able to stand in their place, a constant for the Aeros and the community. “When people think of Akron we want them to think of the Aeros” (R3). R4 linked similar sorts of feedback as an indication of the effectiveness of mascot appearances. “They [community members] feel like they want to come to your stadium because you’re more approachable,” shared R4. “You’re taking time to go to their event or be at their fundraiser. That makes them want to support us.” Such feedback is the sole way of confirming the positive interactions with Orbit.

It is normal to see a team mascot at a game. On the other hand, mascots at community events may be a surprise to some but is possible. The reason behind mascot appearances may differ or may not involve much thought at all; however, based on respondent feedback, Orbit appearances actually serve a purpose: to aid in the spread of
the organization’s key messages. As previously mentioned, Orbit is used to represent the team as a whole. These appearances serve as an example of empathy, the first tenet of dialogic theory, which boasts supportiveness and communal orientation. Orbit is a representation of the Aeros support to the specific event and community in general. In addition the Aeros are aware of the need to adopt communal orientation as a way to continue increasing visibility. Being present at community events reflects the communal orientation in that being involved enhances the connection with those who matter most—the community.

In addition to messages, Orbit appearances aid in the understanding of capital, the second key component of this research. In this instance, dialogic theory and social capital work together in that bringing the community together are front and center. Such appearances coincide with establishing trust, which is a big factor in social capital. Community members are able to witness the effort put forth by the team to support the events in their area. Trust must be earned; therefore, spending time interacting with the community outside of the ballpark and sharing information about the team and the featured organization at the event.

One recommendation related to Orbit appearances revolves around the way in which Orbit is presented and interacts during appearances. First hand experience and observation reveals a lack of awareness of the mascot and, in some instances, the team in general. To help combat such an issue is where the handler comes into play. The handler acts as the voice of Orbit, able to speak and share information about the mascot and the team. Upon further review, the job of the handler has fallen by the wayside. Orbit handlers should capitalize on their time interacting with the community as a way to share
messages and help build brand awareness. Handlers should explain Orbit, his life story, and how he is a key component of the Aeros organization. In turn, people will feel more aware of the team and the mascot as opposed to remaining in the dark, even as the team is moving in a new direction for the future.

The final component of RQ1, RQ1b asked what do the Akron Aeros hope to accomplish based on implemented activities and/or initiatives. Three major concepts evolved from the data.

**Renewed Sense of Faith**

All respondents within the Aeros were asked questions related to RQ1b, and they mentioned the slogan “It’s a whole new ballgame.” Prior to new ownership, the Aeros fan base decreased as the surrounding community felt disconnected from the organization. There was a lack of connection and true desire to support the team during that time period. R3 provided an overarching idea of past leadership stating: “Old ownership ran the organization like MiLB 30 years ago. It was more about reducing expenses than being a part of the community…. the bottom line and the dollars.” This is not to downplay the work of the previous owner; however, the shift in MiLB priorities and functions must be taken into account in today’s landscape.

Because of the new ownership, respondents emphasized the shift in how the Aeros would be run and presented to the community. As previously mentioned, respondents made references to the old ownership and the new desire to take the organization to the next level led by the new owner. “We want people to see what true minor league baseball is all about,” stated R3. “We want to show people we care so we
will give it another shot,” added R1. “It’s the right thing to do.” Ultimately, the owner’s sense of care for all things related to the organization aids in the renewed sense of faith and commitment to the Aeros and the city of Akron.

In connection to the renewed sense of faith, providing an affordable, family-friendly experience was referred to several times in the data. R3 gave a straightforward response, stating:

Our main goal is to provide a product that people can forget about their problems for three hours and have affordable family entertainment. It’s about entertainment putting smiles on kids faces. That’s what we do. We’re selling fun and being a part of the community.

The Aeros are determined to not only tell but show the surrounding community about its dedication to the city of Akron. The organization is aware of the state of the economy; therefore, management wants to offer something that won’t break the bank yet result in a worthwhile experience. As R6 explained: “Things are changing everyday. We’re excited to open the ballpark and have people see the changes of the minor league baseball experience, what it can be, and what it should be.”

The most important recommendation regarding renewing a sense of faith in the community is capitalizing on the slogan “It’s a whole new ballgame.” Respondents within the organization were eager to share their excitement for the future so why not translate that excitement into more messages geared to the community? The organization should be proactive in disclosing upcoming plans and how they relate to the new slogan “It’s a whole new ballgame.” What makes this new and why should the community be
excited are questions that can be incorporated in shared messages and even by Orbit handlers as they interact with fans at appearances.

Again, the Aeros are in a unique position as they have a blank slate to work with under new ownership. This second recommendation is simple. The Aeros should make sure to address faults under the previous ownership as a way to transition with new management. The ability to admit faults from years past while laying out plans for the future will aid help with renewing a sense of faith. It seems the surrounding community would appreciate such acknowledgment. Finally, acknowledging the past also supports sense of care as the Aeros care about what happened in the past and are looking forward to building a better future.

**Stimulate Growth and Future Endeavors**

Again, the current state of the city’s economy and business activity plays a role in the success of the Aeros and the city itself. The idea of driving people to the downtown area evolved from the data as several respondents mentioned the future plans and developments for the area. At the time of data collection, the city of Akron was making way toward opening new restaurants and businesses to promote economic growth. R1 touched upon the progress being made and the need to “follow progress and innovation.” Respondents seemed to believe the Aeros have a place and responsibility to support future endeavors toward the city’s growth and well-being. R3 confirms this notion, stating: “We want to make sure we are affordable and become the true epicenter of Akron. People think of us as the place to do things.”
Being connected to the future of the city is important in that it shines light on the value of sports and a sports team in the community and society as a whole. R5 states: “Corporate citizens are all about giving back. They [fans] come because they are proud of our brand and our community.” In this instance, the Aeros are the corporate citizen attempting to help bring activity to the downtown area. The teams is giving back in more ways than one highlighting the capabilities of a sports team in the community. The Aeros are providing affordable entertainment while also encouraging people to visit other places in the area. In addition to this sense of responsibility and support, R5 mentioned the newly signed 30-year lease with the city of Akron and Canal Park. The signing of a long-term lease means three guaranteed decades of efforts toward growth and improvement for the city and the team. We see, then, that the combination of supporting future endeavors is related to the renewed sense of faith in the team.

In addition to the economic component providing affordable fun, respondents acknowledged the role of the Aeros being a steward for the city. As R7 explains, “we’re excited about the focus on downtown because we need a vibrant downtown.” The Aeros ballpark, Canal Park, is located in the heart of downtown Akron. Respondents offered feedback connecting efforts put forth by the organization to the creation of a vibrant downtown as they are “tied to the success of others in the downtown area” (R1). “There are a lot of things we’ve done but there are a lot more things we can do,” shared R4. This response gives insight to the direction of the Aeros. The organization is aware of its place in the community and works to leave a new lasting impression for fans and potential fans alike.
Offering recommendations for actions toward stimulating the economy and future endeavors is difficult. A simple recommendation is to continue offering support for downtown Akron businesses. All businesses in the downtown area dependent upon the success of others; therefore, support from the hometown team should be beneficial. Whether special announcements of local businesses or increased sponsorship and collaboration, public awareness of the team’s willingness to help downtown businesses is a step in the right direction.

**Dialogic Messages for Communication**

Crafting the best messages for intended audiences is important for any organization no matter the industry. RQ2 asked in what ways do the Akron Aeros create dialogic messages to aid in the level and nature of efforts toward social capital. One source for communication evolved from the data as the best way for the Aeros to share messages and information with intended audiences.

**Social Media**

It is not surprising social media was mentioned by respondents. It has become a top channel for organizations, including sports teams, to interact with fans. R1 mentioned “being direct” and having a “clear and concise message” as key factors when communicating with audiences. It is revealed how carefully crafted messages are necessary when it comes to social media. As R1 continued to explain, “the majors don’t have to focus on other stuff because baseball sells itself.” As a MiLB team, messages are created to inform audiences about children-and women-related events and specific nights dedicated to causes and issues. More importantly, with these messages, “it means content
is always available anytime, all the time,” said R1. “We can push messages more often.”

The importance of keeping a simple, straight message across the board is beneficial for any organization in order to stay connected.

In addition to specific messages, the channel in which they are communicated is just as important, if not more. R1 informs us, “get the right line of communication, then you’re in good shape.” The following two sections present the findings related to specific social media outlets used by the Aeros for communicating the organization’s messages.

**Facebook**

With the ability to friend request, like pages, and share status updates, this social media network is viewed as “more social” by the Aeros. Respondents mentioned being able to push initiatives but not ads and sales so much as it is “more about a balance between sales and marketing and engagement and fun” (R1). R3 supports this notion. Specific examples of the Aeros using Facebook for fan interaction pulled from the data includes contests, updating fans on news related to the team, and any upcoming events at the ballpark. In fact, as a respondent outside of the organization, R9 shared feedback about the Aeros use of Facebook, stating: “I do follow them on Facebook. It’s a very interactive way to get involved with the community. I’ve seen some really great efforts.”

In the same way, the Aeros are able to link with other companies related to the sports industry or sponsors. R1 revealed it is all about branding and presenting the organization’s work and efforts to a larger audience. Facebook allows organizations to build and keep a group of fans with similar interest.
The first recommendation for Facebook focuses on the messages. Facebook should be used a hub for relationship building as brand messages are shared on a constant basis. Creating messages using dialogic tenets such as propinquity and commitment will aid in how the Aeros use of Facebook. As propinquity focuses on engagement, this allows back and forth conversation via the page and respect for those involved in the discussion. As for commitment, this tenet affords the Aeros the chance to show their genuineness and commitment to the conversation.

A second recommendation is geared toward the specific content. The Aeros do a good job of sharing content and pictures from around the ballpark; however, their Facebook content can be taken to the next level. For example, organizations participating in fundraising events, such as Diamond Ball, can be featured on the page. This draws attention to specific organizations and is a simple way for the Aeros to show their support for community groups. Participating organizations will appreciate the free publicity potentially reaching an audience outside of their normal range. Along with special features, encouraging fan sharing is huge. Whether pictures with Orbit or feedback about an experience at the ballpark, fans should feel comfortable sharing their memories with others. This will also aid in the communal feel related to dialogic messages.

**Twitter**

R1 explained Twitter as being more for news as users have “custom-made newsfeeds of interest.” Users follow those they are interested in; therefore, it is important to provide worthwhile information. According to R1, one way to implement Twitter is through the “hook and point.” Sometimes, the Aeros use Twitter as a way to direct
followers to other websites with pertinent information or even back to their own Facebook page for team updates. It is a way to point followers in the right direction for various reasons in a quick, 140-character message.

The recommendation for Twitter is simple. The Aeros currently use Twitter for news and game day play-by-play. Although this is beneficial, incorporating hashtags in their tweets is recommended. R1 mentioned Twitter is used as a newsfeed and way to direct followers to Facebook and other websites; however, more interaction is needed with followers. Hashtags allow tweets to be sorted, collected, and easily searched. For example, the Aeros can ask fans to tweet pictures of themselves with Orbit using the hashtag #IMetOrbit. Whether at the ballpark or at an appearance, fans can share their fun pictures with the mascot. As pictures are shared using the hashtag, the Aeros Twitter account monitor can retweet various ones to share with all of their followers. This is a great way to get fans and followers excited about meeting and taking pictures with Orbit in hopes of it being retweeted. Other hashtags can be created to get fans involved and interacting. Twitter can be used are more than just a place for news and game day updates and incorporating hashtags is a great place to start.

The second part of RQ2 aimed to uncover the role of such dialogic messages when fostering a relationship. RQ2a asked in relation to dialogic messages, what value do the Akron Aeros place on community relations and relationship building with the surrounding community?
Gateway to the Future

The data reveals the Aeros place a high value on efforts toward relationship building. The Education Day Program is the top way for the Aeros to reach out to the community, especially to younger audiences. R3 states, “tradition is important, and that’s what we want.” Respondents understand the need to give the community something to believe in again; therefore, they are committed to providing a memorable experience at all times. Again, the Education Day Program comes into play as a long-running program and a proven, successful way to continue interacting with the community. In fact, this is all established through carefully crafted messages that align with the organization’s new plan for the future. It must be mentioned the use of the slogan “It’s a whole new ballgame” comes into play. The way in which respondents reacted to the use of the slogan indicates a realization of the ability to make a difference for the city.

Along the same lines, the data highlights the Aeros’ messaging as highly valued through the realization of the emotional connection to the city and baseball in general. R1 better explains this, stating, “a baseball team needs a community more than a community needs a baseball team.” The Aeros are aware of the need to clearly convey goals and plans for the future. It is about establishing an understanding between the organization and the surrounding community as needing one another to succeed. R12 claimed, “the Aeros need to do things to make the hometown care a little bit more about the team.” This response highlights the dynamic between a baseball team and the community. Fans and community members need to feel the organization is aware of their needs in order to give full support.
Finally, the data indicate that effective messages are highly valued because it is the responsibility of the organization to inform the community of upcoming events, activities, and changes related to the team and surrounding community. R4 asserts: “We are a breath of fresh air. We’re responsible for upholding that, being involved, create a safe place for families to come. That is our responsibility.” Their image is dependent upon the conveyance of their future in the city. “We are coming into a void,” admits R1. Again, the Aeros are aware of the resurgence of their place in the community. It is up to the organization to pay close attention to the messages presented in hope of properly informing the community of its desires for the hometown MiLB team.
Chapter VI
Discussion

The results of this research offer insight into a MiLB team’s attempt in the creation of and/or addition to social capital through creating dialogue with and engaging the community. The greatest takeaway revolves around relationship building with the surrounding community. Acknowledging wavering perceptions and ideas about the organization is key to moving forward. The renewed sense of faith is most important in regards to relationship building in this situation. According to respondents, fans are uncertain about the future direction of the team; therefore, efforts toward re-establishing faith are crucial. A sense of faith in the direction of the organization informs the team they have a support system in their new beginnings. Many respondents shared thoughts related to how they want to restore the faith within the community.

After analyzing sense of faith, the role of ownership comes up as a major factor in renewing said faith. To begin, the role of ownership is crucial when attempting any sort of connection with the community. As many respondents pointed out, previous leadership was more concerned with running a business as opposed to creating a fun experience for all. Creating a fun environment is necessary; however, according to respondents, the need to feel connected and confident in the team again needs to happen before moving forward. An owner who believes in the organization should put forth the effort to restore faith among the fans. An owner must be aware of such and use them to their advantage to provide a top-tier product for fans, the surrounding community, and ultimately, fostering strong relationships with both. A strong leadership base that understands the importance
of relationship building will then see how giving the surrounding community something to believe in is beneficial.

In the same way, the results of this research highlight the need for strong leadership with a passion for the product to guide not only a MiLB team, but also any organization. It is important for the passion of the work and product to be present in such an environment. Respondents conveyed that a sense of care and passion for the team is necessary before making any attempts at fostering a relationship with the community. Fans want to see and feel the passion for the product and experience it being presented to them. They are not blind to organizations providing a product devoid of thought and care.

As some respondents were hopeful for the future of the Aeros, others did mention their hesitation in supporting the team again based on previous experience. This is where the initial passion for the rebirth of the team by leadership is pertinent. Attention must be paid to respondents’ ideas about the role of staff in providing a quality product. Much responsibility is placed on ownership; however, a staff with such a commitment to the future of the team also plays a part in its success. This research brings that to the forefront, as hometown pride can help drive the production and execution of a fun, family-friendly baseball experience.

Community activities and initiatives also evolved as key components in establishing a relationship with the community and aiding in social capital. The results indicate the Aeros have an existing list of opportunities to interact with community groups and organizations. Participants expressed positive experiences when involved with the Aeros and even suggest others participating in similar events. However, the
results also indicate the lack of awareness of such opportunities. In order to push their desire to connect with the community, Aeros staff members must find a way to promote all of their available activities and initiatives. Although word of mouth is effective, utilizing different communication channels will enhance their efforts. Various MiLB teams offer opportunities to connect with community organizations, so it is possible to bring awareness about available opportunities.

Brand awareness becomes an important part of relationship building. This is evidenced by respondents’ discussion about the team mascot, Orbit. Although players and staff may be unable to attend events, using Orbit is a great way to create association. Because of past seasons and ownership, people in the surrounding community are looking for some indication that the Aeros are aware of and willing to re-establish the Aeros brand. The results indicate Orbit appearances are an ideal place to begin. If nothing else, mascots are able to leave a lasting impression on the youngest of fans, hopefully instilling an early fascination with the team.

Just as Orbit appearances aid in brand awareness and relationships, so is the recognized use of social media to communicate efforts related to it being “a whole new ballgame.” Messages definitely play a crucial role in promoting the brand. The results point to the way in which the Aeros use social media networks such as Facebook and Twitter to get in touch with key audiences. Sports teams are in a unique position to offer different contests, information, and cool interactive conversations for fans. Capitalizing on such opportunities is a must in order to communicate messages but also demonstrate the team’s knowledge of social media use. Respondents shared the way in which they
approach each social media network, showing their ability to properly implement their messages to intended audiences.

One of the greatest takeaways from the results deals with the win-win mentality by respondents both directly connected to the team and those with previous interactions with the team. With the newfound place of the Aeros in the community, there is an interest in connecting and creating valuable opportunities for all involved parties. Although a couple of respondents shared a hesitance in the team’s commitment to the community, the majority expressed confidence in partnering for equal benefit. There is a sense of uncertainty, but the desire to reach out for collaboration is evident. Organizations want to feel it is worthwhile to reach out the Aeros just as much as the Aeros want to offer a worthwhile collaboration with them.

With all of the major findings and takeaways, there are a few overarching recommendations that should be taken into consideration moving forward. First and foremost, the Aeros are in a great position to change thoughts and ideas about MiLB and should take full advantage of it. Overall, this is the most important recommendation. From sharing future plans and goals to specific information about the team, communication is key for the organization. It is obvious there is a lack of knowledge and disconnect between the community and the team; therefore, use social media and other traditional communication channels to feed the community with worthwhile content. This is the perfect opportunity to dive into the history of the team, how they arrived in Akron, Ohio, and all the obstacles in between. More importantly, this sense of open communication will aid in relationship building and social capital throughout the community.
A second overall recommendation focuses on the actual product. More specifically, a respondent mentioned previous ownership’s business-like approach to MiLB as opposed to providing a fun, family-friendly product. The Aeros should make it a point to offer new and exciting in-game activities, opportunities for community collaboration and fan-driven social media interactions to show the city of Akron what MiLB is truly capable of. In this way, the community will become comfortable and confident in the new direction of the team. It seems the more the team is willing to put forth that extra effort, the more the surrounding community will come to realize and appreciate what a great experience is in the heart of their city.

**Conclusion**

This research sought to shine a light on a MiLB team’s community relations work in regards to the creation of social capital in the surrounding community. To reiterate, social capital is defined as “connections among individuals-social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam, p. 19, 2000). As the literature review also points out, social capital intends to establish a sense of community engagement and interaction. This sense of connectedness helps the overall health of the area, promoting relationships with fellow community members.

Based on the results, the Aeros are in a position to not only re-establish the team’s brand in the community but also add to the level of social capital within the community. This is evidenced by ownership’s commitment to giving back, staff pride in a quality product, and community realization in the organization’s new direction. Continued work toward demonstrating all three acts will aid in the future of increased social capital and
relationship status. The place, purpose, and possibilities of a MiLB team in the community are put on display as an example of meeting organizational goals and that of the surrounding community.

**Future Research**

As with any research, time tends to put a damper on the extent to which a topic can be explored. Although this research provides analysis of one MiLB team, there are areas in which future research would prove to be beneficial. MiLB teams differ based on location, league, and level. Because of this, similar case study analyses of other MiLB teams would provide comparative research of community relations efforts toward social capital of various teams. Being able to assess the work of more than one team would allow for an in-depth look at successful and failed efforts. This research lays the foundation for future data collection in order to effectively analyze multiple teams. Of course, more interviews can be conducted and longer hours can be spent doing participant observation, but the basis to begin an all-encompassing look at MiLB team community relations efforts and their role in increasing social capital is present. Thus, future comparative research would offer the chance to create best practices for teams to adopt. Various industries and organizations abide by best practices as precedence for operating; therefore, MiLB teams should be no different.
## Appendix A

### Minor League Baseball League Breakdown

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Leagues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Triple-A</strong></td>
<td>International League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pacific Coast League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexican League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Double-A</strong></td>
<td>Eastern League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Southern League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Texas League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class A Advanced</strong></td>
<td>California League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Carolina League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Florida State League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class A</strong></td>
<td>Midwest League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Atlantic League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Class A Short Season</strong></td>
<td>New York-Penn League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Northwest League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rookie</strong></td>
<td>Appalachian League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arizona League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dominican Summer League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gulf Coast League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pioneer League</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Venezuelan Summer League</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from [http://www.milb.com/milb/schedule/league.jsp](http://www.milb.com/milb/schedule/league.jsp)
Appendix B

Thesis Research Spring 2013
Interview Guide
Akron Aeros Staff and Community Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction/Background</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akron Aeros</td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue and Messages</td>
<td>15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Relations</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in Aeros CR Programs</td>
<td>20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrap up/ Conclusion</td>
<td>5 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>80 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Objectives: The overall research objective is to gain insight about the role of community relations within the Akron Aeros organization as a factor in building relationships with the surrounding community. More specifically, this research will seek to understand or explore:

- **Akron Aeros**: How is Minor League Baseball (MiLB) different from Major League Baseball (MLB)? What does being a MiLB team mean for the overall running of the organization? How have the Aeros changed over the past 3 years? What impact does new ownership have on the overall organization?
- **Dialogue and messages**: What outlets are used to communicate messages to intended audiences? What are the main messages? What is the role of dialogue and messages?
- **Community Relations**: How is community relations defined/known within the Aeros organization? What is the goal of community relations? What activities, events, initiatives, opportunities, etc are in place?
- **Aeros Programs**: How are programs described by participants? What programs, events, activities, etc. work well? How are messages conveyed to those about said programs, events, activities, etc.? What impact does Education Days have in the classroom?
- **Ownership**: What role does ownership play in the running of a MiLB team? How does the transition between owners affect the organization? What goals have been set for the Akron Aeros future?
Welcome, and thank you for your time today. Before we get started, I want to let you know a little bit about what we’ll be doing today:

- **Researcher:** I’m an independent researcher here to understand what you think, believe, feel, etc., so feel free to express yourself—good or bad—as I want to hear it all.
- **Recording:** I will be recording our conversation, but rest assured it is for research purposes only. Recording(s) will not be shared with anyone outside of myself and professor.
- **Discussion:** I want to hear exactly what YOU think. Do not hesitate to share your feelings, opinions, ideas, insights, etc. This is a free and open interview.

Now that we have that out of the way, let’s get to know you.

- **Tell me a little bit about yourself**
  - Birthplace, current residency (city/area), educational background, fun fact, etc.
- **What, if any, is your previous work experience?**
  - Title? Job description? Brief description of responsibilities
  - Location? Duration? Reason for leaving (if willing to share)

We’ve covered the basic “who am I” questions providing a glimpse into who you are. I’d like to hear about your ‘work life,’ so to speak, and how you arrived here with the Aeros.

- **First, what is your official title?**
- **How long have you been in this position?**
- **How did you find out about this position?**
- **How did you wind up with this job? (PROBE: Did you move up, transfer in this position?)**
- **What are your responsibilities?**
  - Describe a typical work day—meetings, calls, emails, projects, events, etc.
  - Describe a typical GAME day

I’d like to dive into how you feel about your current position.

- **Has this type of work (specific position either now or previously) been your dream?**
- **Does this work play into your original work/life plan?**
- **When you were looking for a job, what thoughts came to mind?**
  - What are/were key aspects to accepting your position here versus another position? At another company?

Obviously, the Aeros are a MiLB team. I’d like to discuss the role of sport in your life and in general.
• Have you always been a sports fan? A baseball fan?
• How do you feel about working for a MiLB team? Was this your first choice?

**Akron Aeros**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Now that we’ve covered the basics about you, let’s turn our attention to the Aeros. More specifically, I’d like to discuss the organization as a whole.

• First, describe the Akron Aeros in 3 words
  o If possible, give reason for those 3 words. How come?
• What’s it like being a MiLB team?
  o Are there specific rules and/or regulations to follow?
  o Do decisions have to be approached differently than if the Aeros were a MLB team?
• Being a MiLB team is perceived to be vastly different than that of a MLB team. What, if any, are misconceptions?
  o How are these misconceptions addressed and handled?

The Aeros have been around for many years. Let’s talk about how the team has transitioned and changed over the past few years

• In what ways have the Aeros changed over the past 3 years?
  o Positive changes? Negative changes?
  o What ways have these changes affected the way in which the organization is run?
• In October 2012, the Aeros ownership changed. How has this impacted the organization?
  o Have there been significant changes? How so?
  o What are the goals of the new owner?
  o Have new goals been made aware to the staff?

**Dialogue and Messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>15 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

My thesis is the culmination of study in the public relations program; therefore, understanding how dialogue and messages are incorporated within the organization is key. Let’s move to a discussion about dialogues and messages.

• What is the role of dialogue in the Aeros organization?
  o What do the Aeros hope to gain, achieve, present through dialogue?
• How is dialogue used to communicate messages with intended audiences?
  o What are the main messages?
• What are the main outlets for communicating such messages?
  o Has the widespread use and accessibility of social media changed message delivery? Influenced delivery?

Kent and Taylor are two researchers heavily involved in the use of dialogue in public relations. Because the Aeros are a sports team, let’s discuss implications, if any, for communicating with intended audiences.
• Does being a sports team have any influence on the TYPE of dialogue that is created and used?
  o What is the basis for dialogue?
• Does being a sports team have any influence on how messages are communicated?
  o Being a MiLB team?
• What is your perspective on the role of dialogue in relationship building?
  o Do you see a correlation? If so, how does that relate to the Aeros?
  o Does this play a role in how you create messages for media and other use?

I’d like to gain some insight into the job of a Public Relations and Media Director.

• On a level of 1-10, how important are PR and media relations?
  o What can you do that no other position can?

| Community Relations | 15 minutes |

My thesis is the culmination of study in the public relations program at Kent State University. I’ve become interested in the area of community relations, which is the main focus of my thesis research. I’d like to get your take on the relationship between team and community.

• What role do sport teams play in the community?
  o More specifically, what do professional teams do?
  o Minor league teams do?
• Is there a difference between the capabilities of major versus minor league teams?
• What does community relations mean to you?
  o Is this important? How so?
  o Is such a focus necessary? Is such a department/position necessary?

As the new owner, you have a vast amount of control over the running of the entire organization. Let’s dive into the role of your personal ideas and beliefs in your position as owner.

• What is the correlation between team and community relationship?
  o Is this necessary? How come?
• What goals/ideas do you have for the organization as whole in terms of community relations?
  o If you can give any specifics, please share them.
• How do your personal opinions/ideals about community involvement affect your support or lack of support of Aeros initiatives?
• What do you want the community, city of Akron, and surrounding areas to know about your role as new Aeros owner?
  o Goals? Direction of the team? Structure?

| Participating in Aeros CR Programs | 20 minutes |

The Aeros have organized, sponsored, and hosted various events throughout the community. As a person who has participated in such events one way or the other, I want to hear about your experience.
• Which Aeros event, program, etc have you participated in?
  o Game? Mascot appearance? Fundraiser?
  o What’s the name of the event? Time of year?
• How did you hear about the event? PROBE: Did you make initial contact with the Aeros about said event?
• Did you attend the event, program, etc alone? As a group? With family?
  o What role did you play in the event, program, etc?
  o Coordinator? Parent? Teacher? Attendee?

Now that we’ve covered the basics surrounding your participation in an Aeros event, let’s discuss your impressions of experience.

• What were your initial thoughts when you heard about the event, program, etc?
• What made you want to participate in this specific Aeros event? How so?
• How would you describe the staff running the event?
  o Did you interact with any of the staff? If so, what was the nature of your interaction?
• If you attended an Orbit mascot appearance, what did you think of Orbit’s interaction with attendees?
  o What made the interactions with attendees stand out?
  o Anything special worth mentioning? How so?
• If you attended an event at Canal Park (not a game), what did you think of the event?
  o How were you treated by the staff?
  o Did you feel welcomed?
  o Was your group or organization’s goals for the event met by the staff at Canal Park?
• If you attended a special event night game at Canal Park, what did you think of the event?
  o What was the special event?
  o Did you attend as a member of the sponsored group or as a regular attendee?
  o What occurred during the game as a part of the special event?
  o How would you describe the overall atmosphere of the special event game?
  o Would you attend the same or similar special event game?

We’ve gone over your experience with Aeros events, activities, etc. This last portion of questions will revolve around the messages used to communicate said events, activities, etc.

• Again, how did you hear about the Aeros event, activity, etc. you attended and/or participated in?
• How was the message framed?
  o Was it captivating? Informational?
• What specifically about the message intrigued you most?
  o What made you want to inquire more about the information?
• After your initial interaction with the message, did you hear, see, read it again?
  o How come?
• Do you remember the message?
  o Parts of the message? The main idea?
• Based on the way in which you received the message, was that the best way to get messages to you?
  o How come?
• Would you prefer another form of communication to convey messages?
o What other channels of communication?
   o How come?
• What TYPE of messages peak your interest? What will catch your attention most?
   o Fun? Creative? Serious? Mixture of both?
• On a scale of 1-10, how do you feel the Aeros do with communicating messages to the
  surrounding community and general public?
   o How come?
• What, if any, ways can they improve upon their communication?
   o How come?

THE FOLLOWING SET OF QUESTIONS WILL ONLY BE ASKED TO THOSE WHO
WITH SPECIFIC CONNECTION TO EDUCATION DAYS

• What is your relationship with the Education Days Program?
   o Teacher? Principal? Parent?
• How would you describe the program?
• Do you feel it is a worthwhile program to incorporate into the curriculum?
• How have students reacted to the curriculum? To the interaction with baseball?

Now that we’ve touched upon the classroom aspect, let’s jump to the game day experience.

• How did students react to the game experience?
• Would you say it was a comparable reward for the Education Days program?
• What, if any, feedback can you give about the Aeros staff before the game? During? After?
   o More specifically, what was your interaction like with Aeros staff while trying to
     get materials, resources, information, etc related to the program?
• What do you believe to be the greatest takeaway from such a program?
   o How come?
• Any suggestions or ways to improve the Education Days Program?
• Would you recommend other schools and teachers incorporate this into their curriculum?
   o How come?

Being the principal and/or curriculum coordinator, let’s discuss your perspective on Education
Days Program.

• What does this program do for your school?
   o Students? Classrooms? How so?
• What made you decide to go ahead with the Education Days Program curriculum?
• How has the program affected the school experience?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wrap up/Conclusion</th>
<th>5 minutes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Our interview has offered a lot of valuable information related to the Akron Aeros community
relations activities and events.

• What, if any, final thoughts would like to give about your experience with the Akron
  Aeros
• community relations efforts?
• Is there anything I should have asked you, but didn’t?

Great! Again, I want to thank you for time participating in this interview. Your responses will be a valuable asset the study. Remember that all responses will be kept in strictest confidence.
Appendix C

Respondent Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>R1</th>
<th>Aeros Employee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>R2</td>
<td>Aeros Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R3</td>
<td>Aeros Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R4</td>
<td>Aeros Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R5</td>
<td>Aeros Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R6</td>
<td>Aeros Employee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R7</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R8</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R9</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R10</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R11</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros-teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R12</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros-teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R13</td>
<td>Outside of the Aeros-teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References


Corbin, J. & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, Canons and
Evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology, 13*(1), 3-21.


Jackson, R. L., Drummond, D. K., Camara, S. (2007). What is qualitative research?

*Qualitative Research Reports in Communication, 8*(1), 21-28.


doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.03.007


