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FUSION YOUTH ACTIVITY AND TECHNOLOGY CENTRE: CASE STUDY REPORT

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Mary Ferguson*, Lucia Frecha** & Carrie Herzog**

*Project Manager

**Intern

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SUMMARY

The goal of this series of case studies is to capture the stories of three operating rural social enterprises in Ontario to understand their development, organizational models, successes, challenges, and outcomes. *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre* (Ingersoll), *Willow Springs Creative Centre* (Thunder Bay) and the *Aron Theatre Co-operative Inc.* (Campbellford) are three key social enterprises in the province with unique models, objectives, and impact. Fusion is an organization that manages three social enterprises focusing on youth engagement, empowerment, as well as life skills and entrepreneurial development. Willow Springs supports community development through opportunities for creative expression, and the Aron Theatre Co-operative aims to be a “sustainable cultural hub” for its community. This case study focuses on *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre*, which is unique for the diversity of programs it offers, its focus on inclusivity and accessibility, and the range of resources it uses.



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INTRODUCTION

The overarching goal of this series of case studies is to capture the stories of three operating rural social enterprises in Ontario. This includes the development, organizational models, successes, challenges, and outcomes of each. *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre* (Ingersoll), *Willow Springs Creative Centre* (Thunder Bay) and the *Aron Theatre Co-operative Inc.* (Campbellford) were chosen as three key social enterprises in the province with unique models, objectives, and impact. Willow Springs supports community development through opportunities for creative expression, and the Aron Theatre Co-operative aims to be a “sustainable cultural hub” for its community (Aron Theatre Co-operative Inc., 2014).

This case study focuses on the *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre* in Ingersoll (hereafter mentioned as Fusion). Fusion is an example of an organization managing three social enterprises (SEs) embedded within recreational programming for youth.

METHODS

Case study methodology was employed because of its benefits in explaining a contemporary phenomenon within its own context where the delineation between the context and phenomenon might not be clear, and where various types of data can be used to provide a more in-depth description of the phenomenon (Yin, 1994, p. 23). Fusion as an organization was investigated with a special emphasis on the social enterprises (SEs) that operate within the organization. Primary and secondary data were collected and analyzed to tell Fusion’s SE stories from the perspectives of the director, manager, coordinators, and staff members.

Primary Data Collection

Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with management and employees at Fusion in April and May of 2014. The interviews aimed to determine how Fusion’s SEs developed, and how they are organized and managed presently. The interview questions were adapted from a similar research conducted in 2012 by the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNET) and the Rural Social Enterprise Constellation (RSEC) (Ontario Nonprofit Network, n.d.). This study, including the interview tools, was approved by the University of Guelph’s Research Ethics Board.



Recruitment was coordinated by Fusion's administrative staff, and interviews were conducted either on site or by telephone. Two or three researchers participated in each interview by asking questions and taking notes; nine interviews were audio-taped, and one participant declined audio-taping.

Interviewees included the Director of the Parks and Recreation Services in Ingersoll, the managers of Fusion, program coordinators, program staff, and youth interns.

Additional information about Fusion was obtained through a site visit to Fusion by three researchers in April 2014. A follow-up interview with Fusion's manager was also conducted in November of 2014, to obtain clarification on some of the key data. Photographs and notes were collected and used in the analysis and writing.

Secondary Data Collection

Secondary and contextual data were collected from Fusion's website, social media pages and through a general internet search. In addition, researchers reviewed past reports and literature that focused on Fusion.

Data Analysis

All interview notes were subject to interpretative content analysis to sort and organize data into patterns and themes.

Limitations of the Study

One limitation is that only 12 select staff members were available to be interviewed. There may therefore be gaps in the researchers' knowledge of the operations of this social enterprise.

A second limitation is that no Fusion program participants were interviewed because of limited time and resources on the researchers' part, and because the study focuses on aspects of the social enterprises that participants may not be familiar with.

Finally, all interviews and observations that informed this case study were collected over a limited period of time; thus, results of this research may not represent the overarching reality of the organization.



RESULTS/FINDINGS

Fusion is located in the town of Ingersoll, in Ontario's Oxford County, between the cities of Woodstock and London. Ingersoll was founded in 1793 by the Ingersoll family and has grown to a population of 12,146. The town is home to over 250 businesses that employ more than 8,000 people. The majority of people in Ingersoll work in manufacturing (The Corporation of the Town of Ingersoll, 2014).

As in many small Ontario communities, youth engagement is a key concern in Ingersoll. Community members' concerns over youth vandalism, crime, and lack of youth engagement, prompted the Ingersoll Town Council to include youth engagement as a strategic direction in their 2003 Community Strategic Plan. Council created a specific Youth Planning Group with the following vision: "Youth will be encouraged to achieve a high sense of purpose, of identity and of pride for, and within their community" (Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre, 2014b). The Planning Group recommended creating both a permanent youth committee and a funded youth centre. In 2005, the *Ingersoll Thames Centre* opened, and in 2006, after consultation with stakeholders including local youth, the centre became *Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre*.

Development of Fusion & Social Enterprises

Fusion has been developed "by the youth, for the youth" (J. Smith, personal communication, April 3, 2014). That is, Fusion, and specifically the three SEs, have evolved as directed by the interest and feedback received from young people using the programs.

The SEs have the primary aim of helping to develop youths' work and livelihood skills, and have the secondary aim of creating revenue for the organization. In 2007/8 Fusion began to pursue SEs that could give youth valuable work experience, employment, and training. At that time four social enterprises emerged, including catering as well as the current offerings of computer repair/e-waste, sound recording, and multimedia production.

The Ingersoll Town Council determined that Fusion's businesses will not compete with other local businesses – the SEs offer services that do not currently exist in the area, and set their prices to be competitive based on broader market research. Based on this



criterion the initial catering business was phased out. However, there is a commercial kitchen being installed, and further food-related activities are being reconsidered.

In 2008, a consultant was hired for business planning with each of the three current social enterprises. This resulted in a Business Advisory Committee (BAC) that still works with Fusion to develop the social enterprises. The business plans concluded that each SE requires a staff person, and that each must run like a business; however, in 2009/2010 Council determined that the SEs should be integrated into the operations of Fusion and be run as programs. This has meant Fusion and its SEs are not structured as traditional businesses.

Fusion is municipally-owned and operates under the Parks and Recreation Department, which has four cost centers: an arena, a community centre, a retirement home, and Fusion. The SEs are embedded in Fusion's programming, and are part of a continuum of programs that guide youth through engagement, development, and livelihood exploration phases. Staff is hired for each recreational program, and in addition staff work in the SEs as required.

There are two committees that drive SE program development at Fusion: a programs and services committee and a SE committee. The former is composed of staff that regularly works with youth; they bring forward new ideas to the SE committee. The SE committee explores the youths' ideas to determine if they are realistic and can be incorporated into the SEs.

The SEs exist within the current recreational programming infrastructure and capacity. There are no plans to divest to exist on their own. Their mandate is to build youth capacity and skills, and that seems to be best accomplished by keeping them within the overall programming structure of Fusion. To decrease vulnerability of Fusion overall, there is a distinct line between the recreational programs and the SEs; if income and funding for SEs becomes jeopardized it will not jeopardize the recreational activities.

Fusion and the SEs continue to evolve. A strategic planning process that will delineate a staffing structure to support the SEs is underway. There has also been a proposal for a VIP program to retain youth past age 16 who have been through Fusion's programs and achieved a certain skill level: these VIPs could act as mentors along with a staff person. This model is being experimented with in the radio broadcasting programming.



The Fusion Model

Fusion draws youth between the ages of 12 and 18 from the Oxford County area (see Appendix A). Youth purchase an annual \$5 membership to access all programs and services. Programs include music, audio recording, art, graphic design, photography, television production, video editing, digital game development, computer repair, radio broadcasting, fitness, recreation, nutrition, cooking, and entrepreneurship training (see Figure 1). In addition to the daily programs (3 to 4 per night or 15 to 18 programs per week), other youth activities and services include a skate park, billiards, a lounge, Game Zone, an Internet Café, and an onsite food shop.

The staffing structure includes a manager, coordinators, and front line staff that all participate in organizing, planning, and running daily programs and enterprises. Staff and volunteers supervise, mentor, facilitate, coach, and educate youth; they are also involved in creating funding applications, completing program evaluations, writing funding reports, building local relationships, and seeking opportunities professional development. Staff also plays a vital role in identifying SE opportunities for the youth they work with directly.

Figure 1 summarizes Fusion's model, which guides youth from engagement to livelihood development. The continuum of programming starts with recreational programs, including arts and culture, music and recording, sports and fitness, nutrition, leadership, life skills, and other customized workshops. Depending on their interests, youth choose to become involved in one or more recreational activities. These activities are fun and engaging, but they also teach interpersonal skills like coping, relationship-building, self-management, and respect for the environment and peers. More broadly, they teach community involvement and knowledge of the community's offerings in terms of recreation, sports, and youth support systems. In addition, they equip youth with basic technical skills in each program area, aiming to inspire interest in a variety of career paths.

The SEs link recreational activities to livelihood skills and begin to train youth in an employment setting. Youth who complete recreational programs and demonstrate particular interest in one of the SE areas – RebuildIT/e-waste, multimedia, and sound recording/engineering – are encouraged to pursue further training through the SEs. The SEs provide the opportunity to continue building on interpersonal skills and enhanced community involvement, while providing hands-on training in an area of interest. The



focus is on building confidence to pursue an education or career in an area of interest, while providing opportunities to network and build relationships in the community, understand local career, co-op and volunteer opportunities, work within the SEs to gain income or volunteer hours, and build leadership skills outside of the SEs as well. Within each of the SEs, youth learn about the industry, gain specific skills, and, wherever possible, receive some compensation for their work. For example, young people who participate in creating, compiling and editing videos, or helping to design advertisements for local companies receive payment for their work.

The SureStart program then bridges the transition from the SEs into post-secondary education or employment. This program provides opportunities for entrepreneurship exploration and training, as well as business planning support. It aims to take young people through a self-exploration phase that allows them to discover whether they want to go to college or university, start a business, work for one, or pursue a specific career. SureStart began with the intention of providing training in each SE area, but market analysis showed that multimedia would not lead to many job opportunities in the community, so the program has expanded its focus to other areas. In addition to this training, which is mainly geared to youth of 18 to 29 years of age, SureStart offers business challenge camps tailored to younger groups (ages 12 to 14). At the individual level, SureStart challenges youth to explore their entrepreneurial side, build knowledge of business concepts, recognize the feasibility of a business idea, develop the skills required to draft a sound business plan, and get to know business support services in the community. At the community level, the program fosters connections to the local business community and other small business owners.

Beyond SureStart, Fusion also links youth to employment services and programming in the community. This includes referrals to: Community Employment Services (CES), the Oxford Small Business Support Centre (OSBSC), and the Woodstock and Area Small Business Enterprise Centre (WASBEC). In partnership with these organizations, Fusion helps to equip youth with knowledge of career, co-op and volunteer options in the community and beyond, an understanding of personal accountability and role in career development, the ability to identify employment paths, as well as knowledge of basic job search and résumé-building activities.

At each stage in the continuum, Fusion's programs address four key development streams: health and well-being, community development, personal development, and



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skill development. Overall, the model aims to help youth to become well-rounded adults, who can excel as individuals and community members, as well as in the workplace. At the individual level, this means developing a holistic approach to health, well-being and quality of life, and having the ability to set goals and pursue aspirations. At the community level, this refers to the ability to lead a rich life in the community, including sustained leadership and involvement. Finally, with respect to the work place, it means having the knowledge and motivation to pursue local education, employment or business opportunities, and to thereby contribute to economic growth and development in the Oxford County region.

Ultimately, by involving young people in recreational activities that they enjoy, and then bridging these activities to income-generating/skill-building activities, Fusion's youth are engaged and trained in areas that both match their interests and have possible livelihood outcomes.

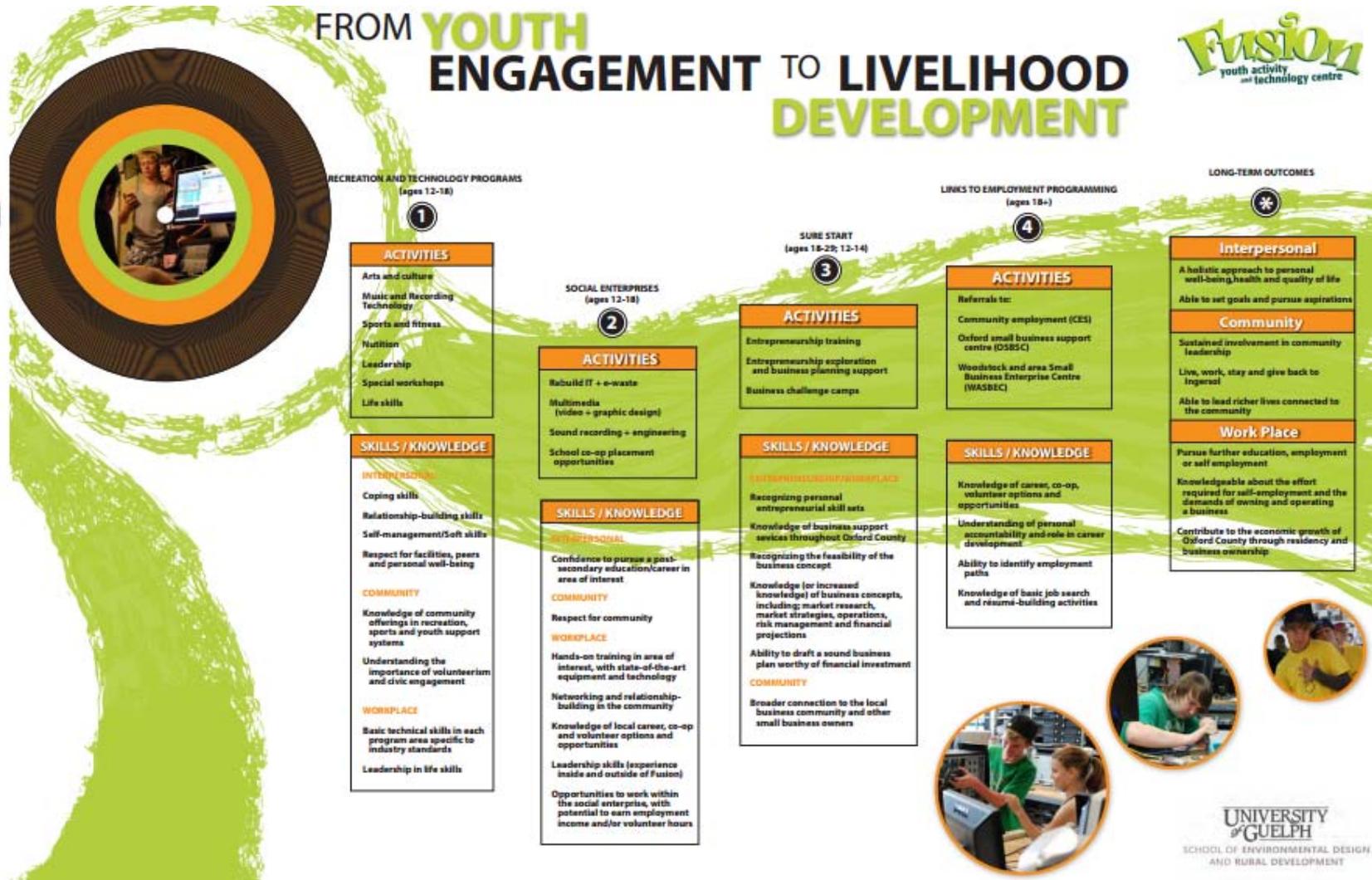


Figure 1. From youth engagement to livelihood development



Resources at Use in the Fusion Model

Fusion is supported by municipal funding, grants, donations of materials and services, and earned revenue. Initially, the Ingersoll Town Council funded Fusion. The Rural Economic Development Fund from Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) paid for the purchase and renovation of a surplus school building that Fusion now inhabits. At the time, Council also approved annual operational funding of \$500,000.

Since opening in 2006, Fusion's annual budget has grown to \$1.1 million. In 2012, Fusion received \$472,103 from The Town of Ingersoll (Pries, MacDougall, and McLeod, 2014a, see Appendix B). In addition, Fusion receives funds from granting organizations. In fact, it is the only one of the four services provided by Parks and Recreation that actively seeks external grants. At present, Fusion's largest external donor is the Ontario Trillium Foundation (OTF). Other large-scale donors include the United Way of Oxford County, Unifor, OMAFRA, the Ministry of Health Promotion, and the Ministry of Employment and Social Development (Fusion Youth Activity and Technology Centre, 2014c). Some of these smaller grants fund day-to-day operations, while large grants, such as that received from OTF, support program delivery and development. In particular, OTF directly supports the SureStart program, and some OTF funds will be used to renovate Fusion's kitchen facilities and reincorporate food service into programming. However, OTF funding concludes in September of 2015.

Fusion also partners with local organizations like the Victorian Order of Nurses (VON) to house adult day programs and the Oxford-Elgin Child and Youth Centre (OCYC) for mental health programs and alternative education programs. These community partners are tenants in the Fusion building and pay rent. In addition, Fusion accepts donations and collaborates with other local organizations to fundraise.

Staff are not assigned a specific SE when they are hired for recreational programs, but they often work above their full time hours (35 hours a week) to assist in the needs of SEs. Revenue from SE work pays staff for extra hours put into SE development and management, with any extra revenues being re-invested into Fusion. Annually, the SEs have raised roughly \$127,000 over the years (see Table 1), with a percentage going to a reserve fund for future capital needs. The reserve fund will reach \$20,000 by 2015.



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Table 1. Fusion Youth Centre Social Enterprise Summary

Revenue	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	TOTALS
Digital Recording	\$ (2,885.00)	\$ (1,871.00)	\$ (664.05)	\$ (10,194.48)	\$ (2,370.82)	\$ (2,117.50)	\$ (20,102.85)
Food Services	\$ (10,821.12)	\$ (4,611.00)	\$ (1,274.50)	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ (16,706.62)
Computer Services	\$ -	\$ (10,514.02)	\$ (6,910.95)	\$ (42,288.16)	\$ (21,761.38)	\$ (20,627.95)	\$ (102,102.46)
Multimedia	\$ -	\$ (13,351.12)	\$ (15,648.80)	\$ (13,797.53)	\$ (16,406.13)	\$ (23,203.61)	\$ (82,407.19)
Total Revenue	\$ (13,706.12)	\$ (30,347.14)	\$ (24,498.30)	\$ (66,280.17)	\$ (40,538.33)	\$ (45,949.06)	\$ (221,319.12)

Expenses	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	TOTALS
Digital Recording	\$ 750.65	\$ 3,550.84	\$ 1,291.50	\$ 557.04	\$ 2,971.79	\$ 2,746.75	\$ 11,868.57
Food Services	\$ 7,851.91	\$ 3,195.36	\$ 2,073.58	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 13,120.85
Computer Services	\$ -	\$ 6,778.16	\$ 2,867.58	\$ 14,388.02	\$ 7,736.02	\$ 14,972.39	
Multimedia	\$ 408.83	\$ 5,788.20	\$ 4,655.12	\$ 3,915.76	\$ 4,485.60	\$ 22,777.42	
Total Revenue	\$ 9,011.39	\$ 19,312.56	\$ 10,887.78	\$ 18,860.82	\$ 15,193.41	\$ 40,496.56	\$ 113,762.52

Total Net Profit	\$ (4,694.73)	\$ (11,034.58)	\$ (13,610.52)	\$ (47,419.35)	\$ (25,344.92)	\$ (5,452.50)	\$ (107,556.60)
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The administrative requirements of the SEs are financed through the recreational budget; if all costs of SE management and administration were taken into account, the SEs would be losing money. However, the SEs exist for the purpose of skill-building and training youth, and as such, they operate as programs that also generate income, increasing the long term sustainability of Fusion. It is the opportunities for youth and the human development that takes place in the SEs that make them a valuable component of Fusion's programming.

In the future, Fusion would like to see Town Council create a specific youth services department instead of housing Fusion in the Parks and Recreation Department. This could provide Fusion with more technical and professional development, career and entrepreneurial development, and other resources to creatively increase the range of programs beyond a traditional recreational structure. Fusion would also like to see support from the province for a consistent staffing structure and pathways for youth when they move beyond Fusion. The province could play a role in providing opportunities and resources for youth to explore the job market, as well as potentially creating incentives for employers to hire young people.

Successes of the Fusion Model

Over 10 years, Fusion has reached and surpassed a number of remarkable milestones, including the formation of a Business Advisory Committee (BAC) that led to the SEs, seeking and securing funding to implement the BAC's plans, and hiring a SE consultant to help guide future SE development.

Amongst their greatest successes, staff members noted that participants who had once been involved in drugs, alcohol, and fighting are now much more engaged in their community and active in exploring livelihood options. In general, youth perceive Fusion as a safe place to have fun and learn something.

Fusion owes much of its success to:

- Youths' central role in guiding Fusion's development, which ensures that activities are relevant, interesting and engaging, and potentially lead to livelihood opportunities
- The SEs separate Fusion from traditional youth programs by providing creative opportunities for young people to explore livelihood options



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- A solid team of staff, who not only develop and carry out Fusion’s programming, but also provide support, understanding, acceptance, encouragement, and motivation to many youth who may not otherwise find this in their community
- Strong relationships with community partners, which allow Fusion to contribute to and draw from community needs and strengths (e.g. affordable facility and equipment rentals)
- The municipality’s support, which has allowed freedom and flexibility during development phases

Challenges of the Fusion Model

Fusion’s challenges include:

- Grants are necessary but often have restrictions, targets, and deliverables that create a sense of “being on the funding treadmill”.
- Funding fluctuations put existing programs and staff positions at risk, and create uncertainty (e.g. municipal funding is subject to cost-cutting and can change with Council elections; increased revenue generation from SEs may also result in reduced funding from Council, which discourages growing SEs to self-sufficiency).
- Striking a balance between pursuing sustainable business practices and keeping the businesses manageable within the existing structure of the organization.
- Tenuous staffing arrangements: staff retention is critical, as turnover can hinder strong and lasting relationships with youth.
- Ensuring that youth continue to be engaged as interests and technologies evolve rapidly: providing access to state-of-the-art equipment can be costly.
- Community response has been mixed. Some community and Council members have questioned Fusion’s municipal funding and are unsure if the benefits outweigh the costs, especially as Ingersoll’s population ages.
- Continued stigma associated with Fusion as a youth centre; this perception affects community support and municipal funding, and makes some youth feel excluded from, unwelcome and/or undervalued in the community (Christie and



Lauzon, under review by the Journal of Rural and Community Development, 2014, p. 14).

- With a complex structure and model, defining and streamlining Fusion's role in the community has been a challenging process.

The SEs within Fusion have their own challenges. They are often on the backburner, as the recreational programs are the main focus. Most importantly, the SEs need ongoing financial support, they can be vulnerable if stakeholders (such as municipal councilors) do not understand them as part of the organization, and expect the businesses to stand on their own. As a result, Fusion must find strategies for communicating effectively about what the SEs add to the recreational program, and why long term support is beneficial and leads to positive outcomes for the youth who are involved. The investment that is required to keep the SEs operational must be clearly understood as an investment in youth.

Outcomes and impacts of Fusion & Social Enterprises

Fusion's work has contributed to a dramatic change in youth behaviour. By forming anchor relationships with staff and peers at Fusion, youth have the support to find an employment pathway for themselves. The SEs in particular, provide opportunities for youth to experience working in a number of industries to help prepare them for employment and training decisions.

The SEs also provide opportunities for youth to communicate on a professional level with adults in the community, which has led to improved relationships between youth, adults, and seniors, and fostered community support. Thanks to these opportunities, youth report feeling more confident, respected, valued, and inclined to stay and work within the community (Christie and Lauzon, under review by the Journal of Rural and Community Development, 2014, p. 15).

Fusion provides a "second home" for many youth. That is, a safe, accessible, and welcoming space, where they can explore a variety of activities, form healthy relationships with other youth and adult staff, and be supported and listened to through the challenges of adolescence (Christie and Lauzon, under review by the Journal of Rural and Community Development, 2014, p. 15). In turn, this helps youth to develop a sense of place, ownership, and pride, which contributes to positive self-esteem and



identity development. As one staff person, put it, Fusion “is very freeing; it ensures youth don’t disappear or fall through the cracks”.

Moreover, Fusion keeps youth involved in creative and productive activities, rather than in unhealthy and potentially harmful ones. Fusion staff report decreased substance use and crime rates among youth in the community. In addition, recent research on the impact of Fusion on youth crime in Ingersoll, found an estimated average reduction in total Ingersoll youth crime per year of 71% since Fusion’s opening (see Appendix C, and Pries, MacLeod and MacDougall, 2014b). Although Fusion’s impact in this regard is undoubtedly positive, the preventative nature of this work is not popular among some community and Town Council members, who argue that since provincial and federal savings result from Fusion, funding contributions should also be made at the provincial and federal levels, rather than at the municipal level only.

Lessons Learned from the Fusion Experience

When asked about important lessons learned about SE development, the Fusion team agreed on a number of key points:

- Planning is an essential step in SE development. Planning has allowed Fusion to learn from other organizations and to better focus their resources.
- Involving youth in the planning process ensures that resources are relevant and that the programs and services offered align with youth needs and wants.
- Thinking back to Fusion’s catering SE, staff added that being flexible and adaptable as an organization is also very important.
- A committed team of staff for collaboration, joint problem solving, and that staff are “on the same page” about the organization’s identity, goals, and mission was viewed as being critically important.

CONCLUSIONS

The SEs harbored by Fusion are evidently successful as part of an integrated model – from youth engagement to livelihood development. The revenue generated is positive, but the greatest value of these SEs is in giving youth the opportunities and experiences



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in employment and business that can guide them through developing their own livelihood strategies.

The role of Town Council in supporting SE innovation has made a critical difference in effectively developing SEs that train and support youth to transition into the economy. A key challenge now is to communicate about Fusion's successes with SEs, and to position them as necessary components to the overall program. The SEs themselves, in Fusion's case, can be seen as programs that have the added benefit of partially covering the costs of their existence.



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APPENDICES

Appendix A. Total youth members registered at Fusion 2013*

Geographic Area Served	Males 12-15	Males 16-18	Females 12-15	Females 16-18	Total Number of Members
Ingersoll	236	179	130	130	675
Oxford County	290	266	157	178	891
Outside Oxford County	4	16	4	4	28
Total Memberships	294	282	161	182	919

* As of November 30, 2013



Appendix B. Breakdown of Funding Sources

	<i>Financial Costs</i>		<i>Total including donated materials & services</i>	
	\$	%	\$	%
Estimated costs of service provision	922,920	100	1,106,460	100
Amount provided by external sources:				
Grants	193,345	21	193,346	17
Donations	115,992	15	299,532	27
Sales/fees	64,638	7	64,638	6
Lease agreements	39,030	4	39,030	4
Hall/room rentals	21,632	2	21,632	2
Events/fundraising	13,751	1	13,751	1
Miscellaneous	2,428	0	2,428	0
Total	450,817	49	634,357	57
Amount provided by municipality:	472,103	51	472,103	43
Leverage of municipal dollars (total estimated costs of service provision divided by amount provided by municipality)	1.95		2.34	

(Pries, MacDougall, and McLeod, 2014a)



Appendix C. Estimated Reduction in Youth Crime

Average youth crime rate in the three years immediately prior to Fusion (2004-2006)	42.26
Average youth crime rate in the six years following Fusion's opening (2007-2012)	26.70
Estimated average reduction in youth crime per 1000 youth	18.50
Estimated average reduction in youth crime per 1000 youth (%)	
Total number of Ingersoll youth (2012)	3,835
Estimated average reduction in total Ingersoll youth crime per year (3,835 youth x18.50/1,000 reduction in youth crime rate)	71

(Pries, MacDougall, and McLeod, 2014b)