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Ready to Serve: Community-Based Leadership Development through a Student-Athlete Mentorship Program

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ABSTRACT

Mentoring works. One of the most powerful outcomes associated with mentoring is the mutually beneficial social, emotional and academic outcomes for both mentor/coach and mentee/apprentice (Ohlson, Shope & Johnson, 2020). Supporting this notion of mentoring leading to an improvement in a variety of skills, numerous studies further support the impact mentoring can have upon a student's social skills, college and career readiness. development of emotional supports and peer relationships (Coles, 2011; Crisp, 2010; Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011). The context of the mentoring relationship also matters. For example, the significance of community-based learning (CBL) initiatives in sport affiliated academic programs have been emphasized in varied publications recognizing the benefits of community-based learning (CBL) and service learning (SL) and their connection to effective pedagogy (Lee, Bush, & Smith, 2005; Lee, Kane, & Gregg, 2016). The purpose of this article is to examine an impactful CBL initiative featuring student-athletes engaging in leadership-themed mentoring of urban middle school students.

Keywords: Mentoring, Student-Athletes, Community-Based Learning, College and Career Readiness, Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring works. One of the most powerful outcomes associated with mentoring is the mutually beneficial social, emotional and academic outcomes for both mentor/coach and mentee/apprentice (Ohlson, Shope & Johnson, 2020). Supporting this notion of mentoring leading to an improvement in a variety of skills, numerous studies further support the impact mentoring can have upon a student's social skills, college and career readiness. development of emotional supports and peer relationships (Coles, 2011; Crisp, 2010; (Schwartz, Rhodes, Chan, & Herrera, 2011). The context of the mentoring relationship also matters. For example, the significance of community-based learning (CBL) initiatives in sport affiliated academic programs have been emphasized in varied publications recognizing the benefits of community-based learning (CBL) and service learning (SL) and their connection to effective pedagogy (Lee, Bush, & Smith, 2005; Lee, Kane, & Gregg, 2016). The purpose of this article is to examine an impactful CBL initiative featuring student-athletes engaging in leadership-themed mentoring of urban middle school students.

Why Community-Based Learning Matters for Student-Athletes

Kuh (2008) emphasized the need for authentic, experiential service-based learning as a valuable pedagogical process, and universities are increasingly being acknowledged for their institutional focus on such initiatives (Lee, Kane, & Cavanaugh, 2015). Mindful of the value of CBL, the CAMP Osprey is an impactful leadership mentoring initiative, which pairs student-athlete mentors from with at-risk K-12 students to develop their leadership potential and college and career readiness. CAMP Osprey builds on the framework that the authors developed and implemented at the University of Florida (UF) and North Carolina State University (NCSU), where over 1,500 collegiate student "coaches" (mentors) mentors and K12 "Apprentices" have been positively impacted.

The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has partnered with universities cultivating the development of student-athletes in the classroom, on the field, and in their lives (NCAA, 2015). Dugan and Komives (2011) determined leadership development activities are significant in assorted individual, organizational, and societal arenas. The engagement in educationally purposeful student-athlete activities fosters desirable educational outcomes for both mentors and mentees. CAMP Osprey builds upon research and provide a unique CBL model for athletic programs and their respective universities.

The Role of Athletics in College Readiness and Success for Both Coach and Apprentice

College courses are paced faster than high-school courses, and expectations of college professors are distinctive from those of high school educators (Conley, 2007). Incoming college students are expected to work with others, give presentations, explain understanding from independent, self-reliant learning and studying, effectively use resources including professors and fellow students, and write lengthier papers that synthesize conflicting information in an organized and empirically supported manner. Yet in high school, expectations are often to memorize material, choose a "correct side" of an argument rather than synthesize information and draw an independent conclusion, and ultimately exert much less energy than is required in college (Conley, 2007).

Athletics and the Importance of Leadership Development

Participation in athletics can increase college readiness and success (Pennington, 2019). Leaders in athletics score consistently higher in reading, math, civics, science, and vocabulary examinations in addition to having a higher GPA and self-esteem (Yeung, 2015). These successes may be in part explained by the fact that student-athletes receive more mentoring attention from leaders and coaches, in addition to the incentive of "don't pass, don't play" policies (Yeung, 2015). The leaders influencing student athletes, including coach, advisors, etc. play a great role in the intended socialization of their students and athletes- serving as positive role models of moral reasoning and positive behaviors both on the playing field, within the campus and throughout the greater community. In addition, these leaders should mirror the desired ideals of respect, fairness, civility, honesty, and responsibility towards their students and activity. Coaches often spend more time with athletes than parents or teachers do, so athletes look towards coaches for appropriate guidance in situations of challenging decision making. Therefore, it is imperative to infuse these same principles when the collegiate student-athletes serve as mentors/coaches to their K12 mentees/apprentices.

Why Student-Athletes are Ideal Leadership Mentors

Recent figures indicate over seven million athletes participate in interscholastic sport, and these participants generally have higher grade-point averages, lower dropout rates, better daily attendance, and fewer discipline problems than non-athletes. Sporting behaviors of athletes are learned and reinforced from the leadership of coaches and advisors (Pennington, 2017). In addition, student-athletes often have the most diversity amongst college students-often matching the complex diversity of race, gender, income -levels and experiences of the high-needs mentees/apprentices.

Leadership Development in a College Context

The most effective leadership programs occur in a specific context, such as a university or athletic leadership program (Zimmerman, Oster, & Burkhardt, 2000). Effective leadership programs explore intercultural issues such as race in addition to facilitating skill-building, problem-solving, service learning, mentoring, community involvement, and self-assessment and reflection (Zimmerman, Oster, & Burkhardt, 2000). Early undergraduate students, whose leadership skills are less developed reap long-term benefits from building leadership skills (Posner, 2009).

Leadership development programs can significantly increase student leadership skills up to five years post-graduation, making participation in leadership development programs appealing to employers who value leadership skills (Posner, 2009). Leadership development programs can scaffold the development of skills in communication, critical thinking, teamwork, and problem-solving, skills that employers seek (Ricketts & Dudd, 2002).

Connecting leadership to other social identities, such as athletics, enables students to explore their leadership practices and personal leadership identities through specific interventions such as mentoring or community service programs (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Participation in student organizations such as athletics promotes meaningful involvement, membership persistence, and identity development (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Leadership development occurs in the context of group influences, changing one's perspective to acknowledge the role of interdependence in viewing leadership as a process (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

While faculty mentorship is impactful to students, busy professors cannot always offer it, so many students seek mentoring from peers or near-peers. Incoming college students seek leadership programs to fulfill a need for affiliation, achievement, support, and may be attracted to environments such as athletic programs that foster relationship building. These guiding mentor/mentee relationships are necessary aspects of leadership development (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012). Exemplary athletic leadership programs include the Purdue Athletics program, The University of Central Florida (UCF) Academic Services for Student-Athletes, and the Carnegie Mellon Student-Athlete Leadership Development Program.

Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program CAMP Osprey

The University of North Florida's institutional emphasis on community engagement is a powerful and significant point of connection with the CAMP Osprey, one of the University of North Florida's premier sources of institutional community engagement. CAMP Osprey's name is the fusion of the Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program acronym – CAMP Osprey – and the mascot of the University of North Florida's athletic program.

CAMP Osprey is grounded in a framework that was developed and implemented at the University of Florida (CAMP Gator) and North Carolina State University (CAMP Pack). Inaugurated in 2007 as a partnership between a local public school and the UF College of Education, CAMP Osprey evolved so that college students completed leadership training and readings, engaged in targeted discussions, and participated in other activities that focused on leadership skills, personal development, and team-building strategies (Storch & Ohlson, 2009). At the University of North Florida, CAMP Osprey mentors originally included students from assorted majors who enrolled in an introductory leadership course and was later expanded to include student-athletes on several teams. The student-athletes do not take a full leadership course but receive a pared-down version of leadership training in six hours of instruction.

CAMP Osprey is focused on five primary goals for the development of the mentors: enhancing leadership skills; fostering learning; encouraging diversity appreciation; developing cultural awareness; and helping K-12 students become college and career ready. Previous CAMP Osprey endeavors have shown positive outcomes including:

- Collegiate Mentors/Coaches: Increased academic achievement (67% in pilot group); increased public speaking ability; increased employability skills
- K-12 Apprentices/Apprentices experienced gains in student attendance (27%) and student academic achievement (11% gain in GPA)
- Increased decreased number of suspensions and mentee grade-point averages (GPA)

University of North Florida Athletics

The University of North Florida is located in Jacksonville, FL. The athletic department's 18 intercollegiate programs have experienced noteworthy success. One of the standout programs has been the women's tennis team, which has won numerous conference championships and has developed dozens of All-Academic Student-Athletes, while maintaining a team GPA over 3.20 during the program's tenure.

Benefits to Student-Athletes

Student-athlete mentors, mentees, and program coordinators all benefited from the partnership between the University of North Florida women's tennis team and a local middle

school. As a component of their role as CAMP Osprey mentors, the student-athletes reflected at the end of their first semester on various points of interest, including the significance of providing opportunities for personal growth, the ability to make a difference, the value of building relationships, and the importance of partnership. Student-athlete reflections associated with this endeavor were shared with University of North Florida's athletic media relations (Women's Tennis, 2016).

Since the initial program with the women's tennis team, further participants included the women's golf team and the women's and men's basketball teams. Following the example set by the Women's Tennis Team, these additional teams underwent leadership training and facilitated the leadership mentoring process, leading campus visits and learning activities for their K12 mentees/apprentices. One of the benefits for the three teams was a consistent improvement in student-athlete GPA between the Spring of 2017 and Fall of 2019. The team GPA for women's basketball improved from 2.9 to 3.4; for men's basketball, from 3.2 to 3.4; and for women's golf, from 3.7 to 3.9. We cannot say with certainty that the improved GPA resulted solely from participation in CAMP Osprey; however, it does align with the research that shows leadership development in college students does impact academic-related outcomes (Posner, 2009).

Coming Full Circle

Student reflections revealed the perceived value and benefits associated with participation in a community-based student-athlete mentoring endeavor. This finding is worth noting, particularly in comparison to findings from a recent leadership study that used the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) questionnaire at University of North Florida conducted by Evans-Buenaño (2016) between 2016-2018. In this study, participation in intercollegiate athletics at University of North Florida was quantified with respect to its influence on the development of characteristics of leadership, such as passion, teamwork, and achievement. While the results showed that participation in intercollegiate athletics can influence leadership development skills, of importance for the University of North Florida intercollegiate athletic program is that its student-athletes reported their lowest proficiency in the citizenship category in the Social Change Model (SCM) (Evans-Buenaño, 2016). The SCM value of citizenship is connected to questions that ask participants to report their involvement in the community, by rating statements such as "I participate in activities toward the common good, I believe my work has a greater purpose for the larger community, and I value activities that allow me to contribute to my community" (Dugan, 2015). Despite the low values given to the SCM citizenship statements by University of North Florida. Student-athletes, such statements were not echoed by the reflective feedback provided by those mentored in this CBL partnership after completing the program.

The findings highlighted a deficit of community-based experiential learning opportunities due to the time constraints placed on intercollegiate student-athletes. The lack of opportunity and time can account for the shortfall of community engagement participation for student-athletes. The qualitative testimonials after one semester of participation in CAMP Osprey suggest a model for athletic programs to follow to provide CBL opportunities for student-athletes. Mentoring programs modeled after CAMP Osprey, which include leadership training for both student-athletes and at-risk students and contribute to the community, show the potential to enhance a student-athletes overall experience and career development throughout college.

CONCLUSION

The CAMP Osprey may function as a replicable template for other CBL initiatives-bridging service, learning, and sports in a format that harnesses the leadership strengths of student athletes. CAMP Osprey's curriculum emphasizes student-centered leadership training, CBL engagement, and a series of structured experiences between mentors and mentees that promote the various "life skills" embedded within athletics including the ability to promote the development of sportsmanlike behaviors and ethical decision-making skills; appreciate health, exercise and fitness; learn about themselves and how to handle adversity; and experience teamwork and sportsmanship (Pennington, 2017). The findings not only demonstrate the educational and personal development potential of such initiatives, but also elucidate the potential benefits of establishing enduring partnerships between institutions of higher education, athletic departments, and K-12 school partnerships.

Building on the success of this initiative, the CAMP Osprey program seeks to support additional future CBL athletic-academic partnerships. This leadership mentoring model is now in the process of expanding to seven teams and over 200 student-athletes-creating a network of collegiate and K-12 leaders who are better prepared to thrive in college and the workforce. The success of CAMP Osprey serves as a call to action to other academic institutions, scholars and athletics coordinators to look at low-cost, mutually beneficial mentoring opportunities for student -athletes. The development of leadership skills can immediately influence the academic and career readiness skills of both the collegiate mentor and K12 mentee- reinforcing all the numerous "soft skills" embedded within the lessons learned of the student-athlete experience including teamwork, overcoming adversity, goal setting and the understanding of the alignment between hard work, grit and performance.

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