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Working With Nonprofit Organizations:
A Study on Dreamfar High School Marathon

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the role of a nonprofit organization, Dreamfar High School Marathon, on students' educational experiences in six Massachusetts schools. The purpose of this study was to learn more about how nonprofit organizations can impact schooling experiences, what strategies they use and how students perceive these strategies. I surveyed 75 Dreamfar students and interviewed 8 Dreamfar staff and alumni to conduct this research. I found that due to Dreamfar's strategies of realistic-goal setting, mentor and coach support, and forming an integrated team, Dreamfar students perceived substantial social benefits in areas related to confidence, student-adult relationships and peer relationships, respectively. Academic benefits showed to be more indirect, but still present. Findings from this research indicate the positive role nonprofit organizations can have in schooling experiences even if they don't work directly in or during the school day. In addition, this research demonstrates that positive outcomes can occur when an organizations' goals align with members' perceptions.

Introduction

Research in the field of education is often driven by trying to better understand what helps students be successful in school. Communities and schools use a number of strategies to promote educational success. These targeted strategies may include curriculum design, class size, parental involvement, extracurricular participation and more. This study looks at extracurricular involvement, specifically at an athletic nonprofit organization, Dreamfar High School Marathon (DHSM). Dreamfar was founded in 2008 and currently works with six Massachusetts public schools, training students to complete the Providence Marathon (a 26.2 mile race) at the end of the academic year. The program is the first High School marathon training program in New England. According to their website, Dreamfar began with 9 students in 2008 and now they have trained over 80 students to complete half and full marathons. (Dreamfarhsm, 2011). Dreamfar strives to enhance students' experiences in school by promoting healthy and positive social and academic lifestyles.

Using Dreamfar as the focus of this study, I asked how can nonprofit organizations impact students' experiences in school both academically and socially? What are some of the strategies Dreamfar uses to positively affect its students? And, how do DHSM students perceive Dreamfar's impact on them?

Significance

Nonprofit organizations are defined as "a corporation or an association that conducts business for the benefit of the general public without shareholders and without a profit motive" (Farlex Legal Dictionary, 2011).   The number of nonprofit organizations

in the United States is growing. From 1989 – 2004, there was a 39.3% increase in the

total number of nonprofit organizations in the U.S (Boris, 2004). Because of their

devotion to benefit the general public, schools are prime institutions for nonprofit

organizations to work with. Some of these programs work in schools directly during the

academic day and others focus their efforts on the hours after school. Time after school is

an extremely important part of a students' day. Research done on after school nonprofit

organizations is extremely significant to educational studies because students spend many

hours in these programs and their experiences in them could shape their schooling

experiences.

Students devote hours to the programs they are involved with after or outside of

school and a large number of High School students are involved with one or more

activity. According to National Center for Education Statistics, in 2004, 76.5% of High

School students reported being involved with some type of extracurricular activity.

Extracurricular activities or after school programs range in the types of services they

offer. Examples of after school programs or extracurricular activities include, but are not

limited to, athletics, art programs, school clubs (such as newspapers and yearbook),

community service organizations, academic tutoring programs, and nonprofit

organizations. Because of this time commitment, educational research must examine if

these extra hours are actually worth it.

Students' experiences in school are often shaped by what they do after school.

Programs that function after school play a huge role in a student's life. Research has

shown that there is a relationship between students who participate in extracurricular

activities and student success. Educational statistics revealed that, "participants (of

extracurricular activities) reported better school attendance than their non-participating classmates. Students who participated were three times as likely to perform in the top quartile on a composite math and reading assessment compared with nonparticipants." (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Due to these striking differences, it is important to examine what after school programs do that works because schools and other programs can replicate these strategies to promote student success. Students spend a substantial amount of their day in school, which can be hard for some especially if they do not enjoy school. However, if students enjoy what they do after school, their excitement may motivate them to stay in school and therefore perform better.

After school programs also serve as a social experience. Many of the friendships students make in school are often formed in the activities they do outside of school. Students are extremely influenced by their peer groups, so it is important for students to form healthy friendships with positive influences. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2006) also found that,

> Students with friends who were interested in having sex, drinking, and using drugs experienced less desirable educational outcomes. These students experienced a higher rate of dropping out of school and a lower rate of being enrolled in academic programs, graduating from high school, and pursuing postsecondary education. (NCES, 2006).

After school programs are a great place to make healthy friendships. Research has also shown that many risk factors, such as violence and drug use occur when the school day is over. The "after school gap," is a concern for many. It is a time when parents are still at work but children are out of school, which makes up 20-25 hours of the week. Adolescents who do not participate in after school programs are " three times more likely to use marijuana or other drugs, and also more likely to drink alcohol,

smoke cigarettes and engage in sexual activity." (Afterschool Alliance, 2007). If students have a place to go to or an activity to do after school, they will be less likely to get involved in these delinquent behaviors.

Furthermore, learning is not a one-dimensional process. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences theory eludes to this point, as he explained that people learn in numerous ways, from kinesthetic learning to linguistic learning. Education can and does take place outside of the classroom. Understanding more about contexts where students can grow and develop is important to the field of education. Given the time that students spend in after school programs and the knowledge that educational experiences can be shaped by what students do out of school, examining nonprofits that function after school, like Dreamfar, is extremely relevant and significant research.

Literature Review

Dreamfar High School Marathon can be broken up into three dimensions. It is an after school program, a physical activity program, and a nonprofit organization. Past research has been conducted on these three areas explaining the relationships they have with students and schools.

After-school programs help academically and socially

As discussed, research on after school programs is very significant, given the known benefits of them. Other research done on after school programs has highlighted these academic benefits as well as social motivations behind participation in these types of programs. Jenner and Jenner (2007) conducted a study on the academic impacts of an

after-school program. Research done on after-school programs has shown that they prevent students from getting involved in risky situations outside of school where violence, drugs, or alcohol could be present. More research is needed on the relationship between academic success and after-school programs though. This study focused on whether participation in the 21st Century Learning Centers (CCLC) in Louisiana had an affect on standardized test scores of students, while controlling for social and economic measures. Results showed that participation in the program did have a significant impact of spring standardized test scores. This study concluded that after-school programs may be as beneficial for academic success as other known factors like parental involvement are. Because of this growing knowledge, it is important to keep researching this relationship specifically between after-school programs and academic achievement.

Ebie (2005) researched students' reasons for participating in after-school programs. For many students, involvement in extracurricular activities allows them to pursue interests not usually covered in the regular school day. In addition, after-school programs have shown to be associated with the development of life skills and teamwork. Much of the research done on after-school programs has been about statistics and numbers like standardized scores, as Jenner and Jenner's (2007) study. Not many studies have looked at students' perceptions of after-school programs. Ebie's study looks at just that. Ebie used an open-ended self report questionnaires from 160 high school students to ask about student perceptions of after-school programs, athletic or artistic. The results showed that social/integrative reasons for joining/staying in after school programs were the most frequent responses, which further emphasizes the importance of after-school programs not only on academics but also students' social lives. This study also showed

that other reasons for participating included improving self-esteem, physical skills and self-efficacy. As Ebie (2005) explains, it is important to understand the reasons why student's want to participate in after-school programs.

Physical activity promotes positive youth development

The role of physical activity in students' lives is also important. Valois, Zullig, Huebner and Drane (2004) conducted a study in South Carolina about perceived life satisfaction and physical activity among 4,758 students. Studies have been done on the relationship between physical activity and mental well-being of adolescents, but there has been growing attention specifically on life satisfaction among adolescents. To study this relationship, the researchers used the CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the Brief Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale. To measure physical activity, the researchers explored different types of exercise, exercise in physical education classes and playing on a sports team. The researchers made two groups, participating in physical behaviors or not. The sample drew from 9th – 12th graders in a random selection of South Carolina public schools. Overall their research showed that a number of high school students who were not satisfied with life were also not engaging in physical activity. If a student is dissatisfied with life, it may be implied that their academic performance could suffer as well. Because of this implication, the researchers concluded that programs emphasizing extended physical activity should be encouraged in schools, worksites, and community organizations.

Madsen, Hicks, and Thompson (2011) conducted a study on physical activity and positive youth development. However, unlike Valois et al.(2004), they used a quasi-

experimental time series design from 2001 to 2007. This different approach provides more insight about the importance of physical activity among youth. This study looked at data from 158 low-income schools, where 94 schools had exposure to a school-based physical activity program and 64 schools served as a control and did not. The research focused on a nonprofit organization, Playworks, which focuses on promoting sports and physical games during recess and lunch. The researchers used the California Health Kids Survey to survey students. They found that "with each additional year of exposure to Playworks, students reported significantly higher scores in physical activity, meaningful participation in school, problem solving skills and, goals and aspirations" (Madsen et al., 2011, p. 63), demonstrating an association between physical activity and school success. However, more research is needed on this relationship. As Madsen et al. conclude, "Programs such as Playworks that promote positive youth development through physical activity appear to ameliorate declines in protective factors and are worthy of implementation and further evaluation." (p. 64), indicating further justification for research on Dreamfar.

The Role of Nonprofit Organizations

Nonprofit organizations work with a number of institutions, especially schools. There is a wide range in the types of nonprofit organizations that work in schools from academic, athletic and artistic and many of them, regardless of the type, have shown to have a positive role in education. Beardsley (2009) did a study on the role of art nonprofit organizations in Arizona schools. She surveyed leaders of 60 nonprofit organizations in Arizona asking about their organization's structure and purposes. She used likert-type,

closed ended survey questions and found that over 75% of the responding organizations used state standards for the arts to develop their programs, showing how these program works with state educational goals. Beardsley also found that through school outreach, these organizations were able to compensate for what schools were lacking in the arts because of budget cuts. She explained that the integration of these programs in schools, "adds depth to student learning" (Beardsley, 2009, p. 13).

Berlin, Dworkin, Eames, Menconi and Perkins (2007) did a study on sports based programs. Two of the programs they studied were nonprofit organizations. They looked at the program design and content, their external relationships, and evaluation results. Their evaluation methods included pre- and post surveys, focus groups and data collection. They found positive benefits including statistics like "92% of 'REAL Kids' reported that the program helped them like reading more." (Berlin et al., 2007, p. 90) and the other nonprofit, Tenacity, showed great improvements in attendance rates in schools. While these nonprofit organizations have different focuses, one in the arts and the others in athletics, both studies demonstrate the positive role nonprofit organizations have in schools and with students.

Dreamfar High School Marathon is a very unique program, the first of its kind in New England. Much research has been done on the role of sports teams and art programs however there is less research on a program like Dreamfar, which trains students to complete a marathon. This particular focus makes it unique research. Additionally, the past research done on after-school programs, physical activity and nonprofit organizations form the foundation of this research. Dreamfar High School Marathon

combines these three areas making this research an innovative contribution to the field of education. This study examined how this unique organization may have an impact on students' academic and social success.

Thesis Statement

I argue that Dreamfar positively influences students' social experiences in school by using strategies that concentrate on building self-esteem, developing student-adult relationships and strengthening peer relationships. In turn, Dreamfar students perceive both academic and social benefits, but feel more strongly about social benefits.

Methodology

I used quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct my research. I surveyed the current Dreamfar students, a total of 75 and received 67 back for a response rate of 89.3%. Dreamfar students come from six Massachusetts public high schools and self select to be in the program. 54% of the students were female and 49% of respondents identified as nonwhite. 13% of the students were in 9th grade, 25% were in 10th grade, 34% were in 11th grade and 27% were in 12th grade [Appendix, Figure 1]. All survey respondents' identities were kept anonymous. Students responded to statements about their academic and social lives, including their attitudes about school and their relationships with other people, since joining Dreamfar. I used a 5-point likert scale from strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1), including neutral [Appendix, Figure 2].

I also interviewed eight staff and alumni that are or have been involved with Dreamfar. I interviewed the President, one of the two mentor coordinators, a board member/sponsor, one of the school coaches, a former coach/mentor, and three student

alumni. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviews varied in length but ranged from 5 – 30 minutes. Interviews were conducted in person, via Skype and over the phone. Dreamfar leaders were asked about their goals and the strategies they use to meet those goals. [Appendix, Figure 3]. The alumni were asked about their personal experiences with Dreamfar. [Appendix, Figure 4].

Lastly I conducted observations. Specifically, I observed two Dreamfar events. One was a volunteer get-together where students and mentors helped pack race bags for one of Dreamfar's sponsor's organization. The other was another volunteer event at a local half marathon, where Dreamfar members came to help at water stops and help the race run smoothly. In addition, Dreamfar students meet after school at their respective schools to do their weekly runs. I was able to attend some of the pre-run meetings at the school as well. I used these observations to better understand the strategies and specific aspects of the program that Dreamfar leaders discussed in their interviews, such as the mentor role, their health protocols, and how the actual practices are structured. These observations gave me better insight on Dreamfar operates.

I received approval from the Trinity College Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this research. All identities were kept confidential and any name that is used was given a pseudonym (marked with an asterisks [*] upon the first use).

Findings and Analysis

I found that student perceptions aligned with Dreamfar's goals. This is evident through the consistency between the program's goals, discussed by Dreamfar's leaders in interviews, and the highest rated survey items from the students. Differences in overall

academic perceptions and social perceptions revealed that the most prominent findings were related to social impacts (Appendix, Figure 5). These specific areas were building confidence, developing student-adult relationships, and strengthening peer relationships. There are indicated academic benefits as well, including how students can use the tools they learned in this program and apply them to school.

"The Impossible is Possible"

Dreamfar's leaders put a lot of emphasis on building student's confidence. However, it is a lot more difficult to help somebody gain self-esteem just by saying so. I found that this organization increases student confidence by teaching them how to set realistic goals. Coaches explained that setting goals can lead to achieving goals, and in turn a sense of achievement can build confidence. The first step is setting the goal. A Dreamfar coach explained that if she can get her students to understand commitment, then they will see results. She explained,

> [We show] them the importance of follow through. By showing them that
> if you show up to practice and you put the hard work in, you see results.
> You see results that you didn't think were possible. Through that
> dedication and commitment. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

This coach continued to discuss how the first part is getting students to understand the relationship between hard work and results. Her choice of the words "you didn't think possible" were not unfamiliar ones. Many other coaches and leaders explained how a marathon and many other things in life can seem impossible. And the "impossible" aspect of the goal makes it even more rewarding when a student achieves it. However, a runner can't go from 1 mile to 26 miles overnight. It takes patience and time and Dreamfar leaders explained how they teach students this. The mentor coordinator said that they,

Just to teach them to take it one step at a time. A lot of these kids have never run a mile. I think when they look back and they realize they can run a mile, they think if I can run a mile I run 3 miles. If they take baby steps to towards their goal and if they stay focused on the baby steps, knowing that those baby steps sometimes can be very painful. Because for somebody who has never run a mile, to go run 5 miles is very difficult. And to keep giving them positive reinforcement and telling them it's not going to be easy to run a marathon and it's not going to be easy to achieve your goal but if you take it one step at a time and you follow the schedule or plan, there's a good chance you can reach your goal.

He continued to explain how much of a mental sport running can be,

Once they get to the point when they've run 13 miles, they're like 'I can never imagine running past 13 miles, that's impossible' and you just have to tell them it's not impossible, you can do it if you want it. 80% of it is up here; it's a head game. And if you can convince them that what's going on up here affects what you're physically trying to achieve that's what you're here for. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

While many perceive running to be purely a physical sport, this mentor explained that so much of running is a mind-set. Even the better athletes on the team needed help staying motivated. However, this baby step approach seemed to be working well for the Dreamfar students. Dreamfar takes many precautionary measures to make sure students are able to achieve their goal and do so in a healthy way. If students are too aggressive with training, they may get injured and not be able to run. Dreamfar's board includes a doctor, nutritionist, psychotherapist and a physical therapist and all students must be evaluated to make sure they are healthy to complete a marathon. Through speaking with the President about this particular issue, it is clear that Dreamfar does all it can to make sure they do not set their students up for failure, because 26.2 miles is a lofty a goal. By using a slow but progressive training schedule, evaluating students health risks and teaching students how to go one mile at a time, Dreamfar is able to teach their students

how to set goals. Dreamfar leaders explained that this is what leads to student

achievement, and therefore confidence. A board member explained,

> I think some people can only be so smart and can only be good at some
> things, but anyone can move 26 miles if you set your mind to it and when
> you do, the result can be pretty amazing. You can believe in yourself.
> (Personal Interview, October 2011)

The mentor coordinator summed this up nicely as well saying that they "give kids the

confidence they may not have… [by showing] them that impossible is possible."

Dreamfar leaders emphasize goal setting and confidence and feel that it is

important part of the program and the survey of current students revealed that the

students perceived this. 73% of Dreamfar's current students agreed or strongly agreed

that they set goals for themselves since joining Dreamfar, with a mean of 4.22 on a scale

of 5 (making the average response, 'agree'). In addition 69% of students agreed or

strongly agreed that they have more confidence overall ($M = 4.06$). These two responses

were among the highest on the survey, indicating that students prioritized goal setting and

confidence as two important benefits they get from the program. Alumni testimonies

supplemented this finding as well. A female alumnus explained her reason for doing the

program a second year was because she "liked being able to accomplish something." She

also said, "It's awesome to feel like you're doing something that is that amazing and so

few people actually do that." A male alumnus explained, "It makes you better all around,

you're healthier, you're more active, you're looking better, you're healthy and running,

it's just awesome." Both of these student alumni kept repeating how "awesome" the

program was. As they described their experiences, their emotions and descriptions

implied that they still felt extremely excited and proud to discuss their accomplishment.

They were all eager to share their personal story and even though they mentioned that there were parts that were difficult, the "awesome" outcomes trumped any hardships they may have had along the way. Neither of the students had anything negative to say and all 3 of the student alumni went back the next year and completed a second marathon.

The survey data and alumni testimonies demonstrate how the Dreamfar leaders are effective in building confidence, by teaching realistic goal setting. The implications of this finding could improve classroom in a positive way. If students respond positively to setting goals, this finding indicates that this strategy could help students in class. Teachers can set smaller, desirable goals for the students to reach related to academics. Students can get frustrated and give up when they aren't able to complete something in class. This defeat shatters their confidence and in turn the student may shut down. However, based on Dreamfar's success of building confidence through goal setting, teachers should break assignments into smaller goals for students that are having trouble. Curriculums should be thought more of as 'steps' or smaller goals, with teachers working on one piece at a time. This way students can feel a sense of achievement, because if they do, the outcome can be extremely positive.

"I Saw Them as People"

Forming relationships with adults can be a difficult task for adolescents, however these relationships can be very positive ones. I found that Dreamfar leaders believe it is important for students to have strong relationships with adults for a number of reasons. They discussed that adults can provide a level of support for students, be it emotional, social, or physical. They also discussed that it can help students see adults as humans or

friends, which can be extremely beneficial for developing relationships with adults.

Dreamfar helps students form these relationships by providing every student with a

mentor or coach. No student runner is ever on the road without adults present. This

relationship forms while the student is out running with the adult. Because there are no

distractions while running, it is a great time to communicate. The mentor coordinator

explained that,

> It (forming the relationship) just all happens out the road, talking and
> connecting with the kids. And that's not easy to do sometimes and I think
> that there is a love of trust that needs to develop between you and a kid.
> (Personal Interview, October 2011)

The adults in the program support the students through the difficult times and the

amazing times. This mentor shared his story with his student, which further exemplified

the connection they formed. He explained that the Friday before the marathon,

Dreamfar's president called him telling him that they had to pull his runner, *Deval,

because of a potential health concern. The mentor explained that he "was devastated."

However, the president was able to get Deval an appointment with a cardiologist but the

student's parents couldn't take him. His mentor left work, drove 45 minutes to pick him

up and take him to the appointment. In the end, Deval was cleared to the run the

marathon on Sunday. The mentor discussed the experience at the end of the race and said,

> Deval ran the whole way, and at the last half mile he said 'let's push it'
> and I said 'Deval, I got nothing left in me, I said you go for it. You've
> earned this.' The last half mile, he smoked me, and I caught up with him at
> the finish line – his young legs and strong heart got him there. And when I
> got there, I got a big hug from him. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

A board member emphasized that forming these sorts of relationships can be challenging

but extremely rewarding, as the mentor coordinator highlighted. She discussed,

> The other piece that has resonated with me is making driving relationships with adults, so making solid almost friendships with adults. I think kids at certain ages think adults are the enemy, you know we're teachers, we're this; we're there to make it hard for them. And in this case their showing how you can create relationships with people that are older than them that are meaningful and help support their growth. And I think they then see the community of older people differently. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

The "support" network is an extremely important part of the relationship. Many students may not be receiving adequate support from adults, but in Dreamfar, the students always have an adult present cheering them on. In addition, the board member discussed how this relationship can help students see adults in new ways. A coach, who happens to be a teacher at one of the schools as well, discussed how forming relationships with students through Dreamfar helps his students see him as a person and that this can have positive outcomes. He explained,

> The students learn how to interact socially with adults which can be hard and I think one thing that is really beneficial is that it gives them a chance to see the teachers that are in the program… as human beings, where as its tough for them to humanize their teachers but when they see their teachers are humans they can care more about them and that can change their whole perspective on their studies too. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

The relationships that form between adults and students is one that Dreamfar leaders addressed as one of the strengths of the program. These relationships extend students' support system and allow them to see adults as human beings as opposed to the "enemy." Having these positive role models around may help students stay out of trouble or if they are in trouble, give them someone to turn to. As discussed, the period after school can be a time of increased violence and drug use, but by giving these students something to do during that time where adults are present is a very positive thing. And adults are more

than just present or supervisors, but they become friends and role models for their

students.

This finding resonated with the Dreamfar students.' Over half (57%) of the

current Dreamfar students already said that they feel that they have better relationships

with adults ($M = 3.93$). The alumni testimonies support this finding as well. As the

Dreamfar leaders discussed, providing support and a positive role model is an important

part of the relationship. One male alumnus spoke about his perceptions of the type of

support he received,

> The mentor I ran with the majority of my junior year was a really great
> person to talk to because my junior year I was still having a lot of
> problems and he was a really good listener so if we were out running for 2
> maybe 3 hours, you end up talking to the person you're running with so he
> was a really great person to talk to. I think the mentors are specifically
> chosen as good role models, so he had some really good advice. And also
> just with the running, he was really good at motivating me and keeping me
> going. That role as a mentor, they make you a better runner and if you
> need it they make you a better person. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

As the mentor coordinator explained, a level of trust needs to develop between the

student and adult. A male alumnus explained how he confided in his mentor and how this

helped him see adults "as people." He said,

> I had one mentor and she was the best, and I talked with her, I basically
> told her my life story and she helped me through a lot of things that I had
> been going through that year... I think it made me more comfortable with
> adults. It enabled me to talk to them as adults instead of trying to talk to
> them as a teenager; I saw them as my age or just saw them as people.
> (Personal Interview, October 2011)

Another male alumnus agreed that him helped him view adults differently, specifically

teachers, and said, "It improved my relationship with teachers because they were

interested in what I was doing, so it allowed me to have something to get teachers to

understand where I was." The student perceptions on forming relationships with adults

showed to be a positive one.

This positive relationship has the potential to help students in a number of ways,

including making students feel more comfortable in school with teachers. If students start

to see adults as humans, they may be more able to relate to adults as a whole. It also has

the potential to keep kids safe by providing them a safe space with good role models.

This finding indicates that teachers or adults working in program outside of school can be

a very positive experience. This finding encourages that teachers and other adults in the

community should be working as coaches, tutors, mentors, and other informal roles

where students have the chance to see adults as friends. These informal relationships

make students feel more comfortable with adults and therefore more connected to adults.

Adolescents are at a difficult age in their lives and can benefit from all of the support they

can get, especially because many of them may not have close relationships with their

parents.

"A Common Purpose"

I found that Dreamfar High School Marathon seeks to enhance student's

experiences by improving their social lives. Socialization is a very important part of the

program even though running is an individual sport. The group meets three times a week

and throughout the year, there are organized events where the group gets together as well.

In addition, each student from all six schools is given a running singlet and other

Dreamfar clothes so when they are out running they are united as a team. The president

described an extremely touching story about the team aspect of the program. Three days

before the marathon, one of the student's mothers passed away. She had been sick for a while, but it was obviously extremely challenging. His father, understanding how important his son's team and the marathon was to him, postponed the funeral so he could run the marathon. Three days later he completed the marathon with the team by his side and the following week when the funeral occurred, every member of Dreamfar that year showed up to the funeral to support him. The president explained how this was support was not unusual because, "we care so much about each other. These kids become each other's family. You spend so many hours on the road together, that you learn so much about each other and form such in-depth relationships."

One of the best parts of this particular team, Dreamfar leaders explained, is that it mixes all different kinds of students. While some of these schools come from relatively homogenous areas, Dreamfar attracts all different kinds of students. Other after school program in schools don't always have this success. A board member explained,

> Dreamfar integrates people who would not necessarily been integrated. So sports drive 'sports people' to show up but what this does is it integrates 'non-sports people' with 'maybe-sports people' with maybe just 'smart people' or people who never in a million years thought they were a sports person and brings them all together. And the reality is I think people have a lot more commonalities than they think but they judge people how they look or who they hang out with or those kinds of things. I think that's the biggest strength, it brings people together that would not have necessarily come together. With a common purpose which I think helps too, because if you're just in a room it's different then if you are all actually trying to get something done. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

This "common purpose" is an important piece of social integration. When students are out on the road, they are not thinking about what they look like that at the point, they are thinking about reaching a certain mile mark. And because all of the students go through the same challenges together, they can relate to one another. If students find something

they can identify with in another student, they can start to form more connections. The President explained,

> The kids from Dreamfar come from all different cliques and backgrounds, it doesn't matter if you're the wealthiest or poorest kids in the school because everyone puts on a pair on sneakers the same way and runs with one foot in front of the other. These kids also come with different academic backgrounds. We had one of the students with the highest GPAs in the school best friends with a one of the students with the lowest, and these two students wouldn't have met or known they shared so much in common if it wasn't for Dreamfar. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

A coach explained that she saw her students "gain social confidence in developing friendships and connections throughout the program." And even students that were more shy or confined to one clique she said she saw. "students were completely withdrawn come out of their shells and make social contacts and relationships that they never would have before. And they were more open-minded to different peer groups."

The most agreed to statement on the survey was "I met friends I would not have otherwise." Over 75% of Dreamfar students agreed that they met new friends since joining Dreamfar ($M = 4.13$) and concurrently over half of the students agreed that they now have more friends. A male alumni explained how making friends through Dreamfar helped in a number of ways:

> I made a lot of friends through Dreamfar. I met a lot of kids, at the time I was feeling kind of disconnected from the school community so it really helped me meet a good group of kids. And one thing I really liked especially during my senior year was getting to help out the younger students and seeing some kids who were kind of in a similar place that I was, struggling in school and struggling socially. It was really nice to be able to help other kids improve themselves. It really helped my confidence and self-esteem to feel like an important member of the group and organization. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

A female alumni explained that everybody in the program is different but that she cherished those close connections with those people. She said, "Everyone is so different;

it attracts all different kind of people…. I liked the social bonds cause everyone gets really close." Dreamfar's demographics highlight this finding as well. While the schools that Dreamfar works with are relatively homogenous, half of the students are white and the other half are non-white (Asian, Black, Hispanic or other). In addition, the students come from a good balance of all four-grade levels, 9th through 12th. Dreamfar has an even gender balance as well.

Strengthening a student's social network is very beneficial for a their well-being. Given the known awareness about bullying that occurs among adolescents, it is important for students to feel like they have a group of friends they can rely on. It helps that these students come from different backgrounds as well. By deconstructing social cliques, students may be more open and accepting to people that are not like them. Programs that address these issues may be making steps in the right direction of mitigating hate crimes and increasing tolerance. The social implications, not only for student's well-being, but for society as well, are hopeful. I found that Dreamfar had success with integrating different kinds of students and strengthening peer relationships by emphasizing the 'team' aspect as well as creating a common purpose among the students. These two strategies showed to be quite effective ways to build peer relationships, as the students agreed that they met new friends they wouldn't have otherwise and have more friendships now as well.

"Stick to a Plan"

While the academic perceived benefits are not as prominent as the social perceptions, they still exist and Dreamfar leaders feel that by providing their students

with certain tools, such as teaching them how to set goals, they can enhance students academic experiences as well. As discussed, students' experiences outside of school has shown to be associated with performance in school. The Dreamfar leaders discussed how they do this. A former coach explained that, "If you didn't have a belief in yourself academically, but the marathon drives your confidence in your ability to do something, then things that were scary like science may be less scary if you have higher belief if what you're capable of." A male coach said that, "If they stick to a plan with a marathon they could take that same tool and use it academically." The President explained a story about a student who was having a lot of trouble in school but was interested in Dreamfar. The student would show up to practices randomly, but as any coach would tell you, training for a marathon needs to be a consistent thing. One of Dreamfar's policies is that students must attend school in order to run with the team. This student's interest in Dreamfar motivated him to show up to school. The student ended up completing the marathon and graduating from high school. The President also discussed the most important part of the program is helping students complete high school and that completing a marathon is just a bonus. A former coach supplemented the policy of showing up to school in order to participate and said, "I saw kids doing better in school, coming to school more often because they wanted to be part of the team, they wanted to run."

After surveying students, I found that 63% agreed or strongly agreed that they feel more connected to their school ($M = 3.9$) and half of them agreed that they have more confidence in class. Feeling connected to school may help motivate students to show up if they have a reason for coming. In addition, improved confidence in the class may help

students participate more, ask more questions and feel like they have a place in the classroom. A male alumnus explained how Dreamfar motivated him to get his work done even though he was not enjoying school,

> It gave me something other than school to look forward to I guess. Well I had done really badly in school my first couple of years, but when I started doing Dreamfar, after practice I had a reason to go do my homework and it gave me motivation to get my work done and allow me to focus on something I enjoyed, cause I wasn't enjoying school, but it was something I had to do if I wanted to keep participating in Dreamfar. (Personal Interview, October 2011)

Another male alumnus agreed that he, "definitely picked up grades, started paying attention more." And a female alumnus said that, "it definitely shaped all of high school."

While Dreamfar is not an academic tutoring program, there are indicators of academic achievement, from students showing up to school more often to students feeling more connected to their school. Any academic related benefit has the potential to improve a student's experience in school. If a student enjoys school more and is more motivated to show up, the educational outcomes can be very positive.

Conclusion

Dreamfar High School Marathon used targeted strategies to improve student's experiences. These strategies included teaching their students valuable lessons about confidence and building relationships with other peers and adults. Through a variety of approaches to teach these lessons, Dreamfar uses successful outreach methods. Dreamfar students perceived these strategies and through testimonies with alumni, it is clear that the students valued them as well. This alignment in program goals and student perceptions is important for any organization to be successful. An organization can have

a set of desired goals, but if students don't actually feel that they are getting something out of the program then the benefits may not be as strong as they could be. In addition, findings from this research shed light on how nonprofit organizations can help students. They explain how nonprofit organizations can work with schools. These organizations have the ability to improve student's experiences in school, even though they may operate in the hours after school. By walking students hand in hand and showing them how to set realistic goals for themselves using baby steps, students developed more confidence. By using mentors as support systems and having adults consistently present and always reliable, students felt more comfortable with adults. By creating one common purpose and putting the team first, students made new and more friendships with students they may not have otherwise. And finally, by applying some of these social skills to their academic lives, students' felt more connected to their schools. Dreamfar used these strategies to help students be successful academically and socially. And while there was a higher perception of social benefits because of the program's emphasis on social strategies, academic benefits were perceived as well.

Future Research

Given that the marathon is in May, future research of this study could be to survey the students again at the end of the year and see if their perceptions have changed. From the data already collected, students who reported that they are a returning runner had an overall response of 4.2 to all of the survey statements totaled, where as students in their first year had an overall response of 3.6. This indicates that continued participation with the program may be associated with greater positive perceptions. A pre and post survey may yield interesting results when the new students have experienced the program in full.

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Appendix

Figure 1. *Racial make-up and grade levels of current Dreamfar Students*
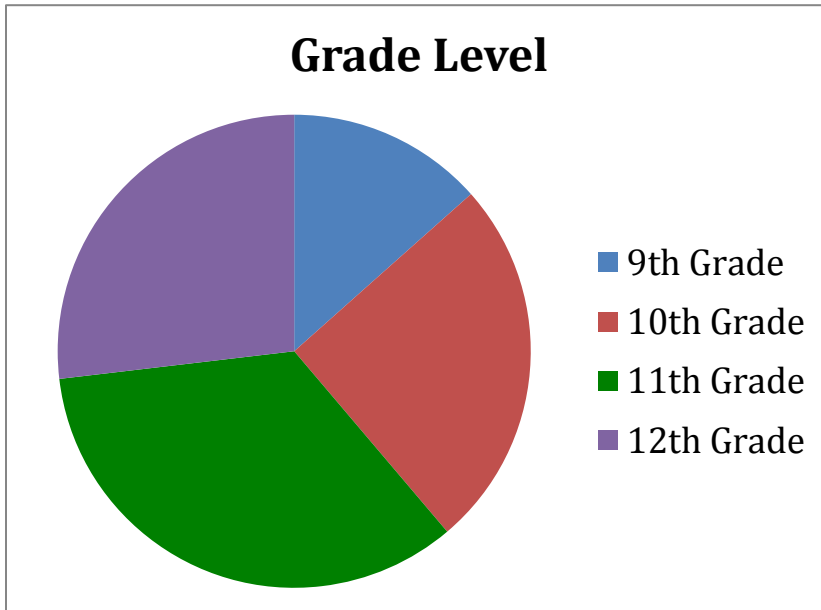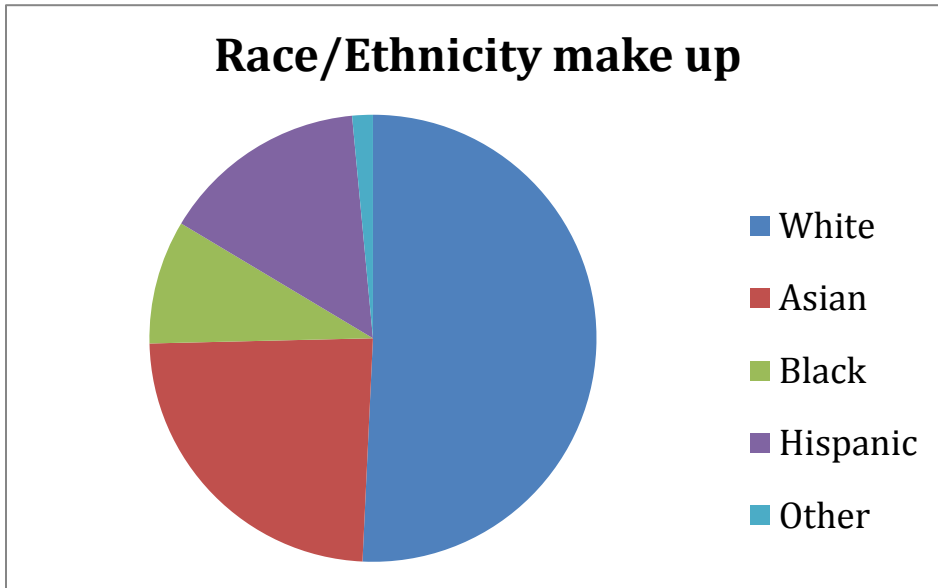

Race/Ethnicity make up

- White
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic
- Other

Grade Level

- 9th Grade
- 10th Grade
- 11th Grade
- 12th Grade

Figure 2. *Survey statements from the questionnaire*

	RATING				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have better relationships with adults					
I have more friends					
I met friends I would not have otherwise					
I am better at communicating with others					
I participate in more social events					
I feel more connected to students at my school					
I am closer to my parents					
I have more confidence					
I am happier with my social life					
I have more trust in people					
I set goals for myself					

	RATING				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have better relationships with my teachers					
I go to class/school more often					
I am more likely to do my homework					
I try harder in school					
I am more motivated to graduate					
I want to go to college					
I feel more connected to my school					
I think my grades have improved					
I am more confident in class					
I feel more comfortable asking for help					
My schoolwork does not stress me out as much					
I enjoy school more					

Figure 3. *Interview Questions for Dreamfar Leaders*

- What is your role with Dreamfar? (I.e. Board Member, Coach, Mentor Coordinator, etc.)
    o And, what does your position entail?
- How did you find out about Dreamfar?
- How long have you been with Dreamfar?
- Why did you decide to work with Dreamfar?

- In your opinion, what is Dreamfar trying to achieve?
    o What is the overarching goal of Dreamfar?
- What strategies do you or Dreamfar use to help reach the goal?
    o (examples and importance)

- How do students benefit from the program?
    o What do students get from Dreamfar?
    o (to follow…) Are there any examples you'd like to share about students who are/were positively affected by Dreamfar?

Figure 4. *Interview Questions for Dreamfar alumni*

- How and when did you find out about Dreamfar
    o Why did you come back a following year

- When you were a member of Dreamfar, how, if at all, did it impact your academic life?
    o How did influence your experience in high school
    o How did affect your relationship with other students and adults

- What was the social part of the program like for you?

- Can you describe your relationships with your mentor or coach?
    o Was that a positive relationship?

- What was your favorite memory of Dreamfar?
- If you were recruiting students, why would you tell them to join?

Figure 5. *Difference in Totaled Academic and Social Means*