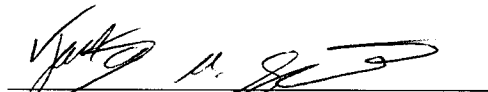


Athletic Connections: An Athletic Learning Outreach Program

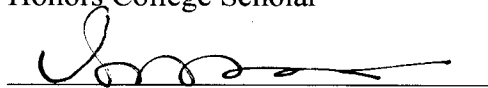
Honors Project
In fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

by
Jack M. Slavin
UNCP School of Business
April 27, 2016



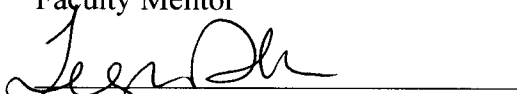
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ABSTRACT

ATHLETIC CONNECTIONS: AN ATHLETIC LEARNING OUTREACH PROGRAM

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May 7th, 2016

This essay discusses a service-learning program to fulfill the UNCP Honors College requirements. The program is based on academic research initiated in the author's freshman year at UNCP, studying the impact of and positive correlation between athletics and academics in youth. The research suggests an effective athletic learning outreach program may contain four core competencies: teambuilding, communication, goal setting, and self-confidence or positive self. Based on the research, an important factor in creating a one-day program is to foster mentorship (student-athletes and youth participants) in order to allow the youth participants to see their possible selves. Athletic Connections emerged out of this research with its goals to help build basic communication, leadership, and goal-setting skills for young student-athletes so that they can have stronger, more meaningful interactions with their teachers, parents, and peers; to help students build self-esteem and self-confidence through sports activities; and to include possible selves programming (Hock, 2011) for their cultivation of interpersonal relationships and high self-esteem crucial to a student's long term success. Athletic Connections has progressed since its inaugural year earning multiple awards and accolades. Athletic Connections is an annual, all-day, high intensity event composed of six different activity stations focused on the core competencies previously mentioned. This program brings together student athletes, university departments, local organizations, and businesses to partake in an athletic field day exemplifying the connection and importance between athletics and academics. The third annual Athletic Connections event, April 16, 2016, served forty-four youth participants from six different local youth organizations.

Athletic Connections: An Athletic Learning Outreach Program

Athletic Connections is an annual, all-day, high intensity event that brings together student athletes, volunteers, university departments, youth participants, local organizations, and businesses to partake in an athletic field day exemplifying the connection and importance of athletics and academics. The author seeks to create a judgment free environment for local youth to build confidence in their self-esteem, goalsetting skills, work ethic, and leadership skills. The mentors (athletes) assist the mentees (youth-participants) in focusing on and engaging in multiple physical activity stations that intertwine critical thinking and sport specific skills. These elements are essential to scholastics, sports, and life with the focus on teamwork, communication, and positivity.

Athletic Connections involves active participation and leadership in a focused project involving service to the community on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Athletic Connections is advised and guided by faculty mentor Dr. Scott Hicks, the current Director of The Literacy Commons. The author's major of Business Administration with a dual concentration in marketing and management was an integral part in the success of Athletic Connections. In AY2015-2016, Athletic Connections had an operating budget of \$3,500 and was fully funded through sponsorship agreements and private funding models learned in the UNCP School of Business. Athletic Connections is an event composed of multiple components of which management becomes essential in building longstanding positive relationships in order to ensure the mentees' attendance and the UNCP student-athletes' dedication. The ability to write marketing proposals and professional business letters are an integral part to the success of Athletic Connections.

Literature Review

Athletic Connections seeks to respond to growing concerns among parents and educators regarding appropriate balance between athletics and academic (Gaston Gayles, 2009). Some general concerns include whether athletics cause students not to have enough time to complete their homework assignments and that it causes students to be too tired to focus during academic hours. However, athletics has a positive effect on academics as students produce identical if not better grades, test scores, and graduation rates when additional time is devoted to athletic activities (Gaston-Gayles, 2004). Data also show that students who participate in physical activity, especially competitive sports, are also healthier, which builds a higher self esteem level and may cause more incentive for the student to succeed in school (Larson, 2000). Furthermore, research shows that fundamental factors can be directly transferrable from athletics to academics such as teamwork, time management, self-discipline, general communication skills, the ability to understand goal setting, and the development of cognitive factors.

Such research justifies the establishment of athletic learning outreach programs run by institutions of higher education that provide positive educational opportunities to students through athletics and physical activity.¹ Such activities help students become better students in the classroom, build an understanding for goal setting, and build key skills that will help the students succeed in life. According to various researchers and practitioners, structured voluntary academic/athletic activities are needed. They “are voluntary and involve some sort of structure, that is, where students’ participation occurs within a system involving constraints, rules, and goals” (Larson, 2000; see also Bell, 2016, and Petitpas, 2004). Furthermore, continued athletic learning outreach programming is important to sustain “motivation and optimism, [which] begin

¹ To the knowledge of the author, the original research article is the first to call these programs Athletic Learning Outreach Programs.

to diminish with repeated failure. By the upper elementary grades, teachers begin to see ‘unmotivated’ students” (Hock, 2011).

An effective athletic learning outreach program might incorporate aspects of the National Football Foundation’s Play It Smart program,² whose goal is to “enhance sport experiences in order to promote social and personal development” (Hock, 2011). The youth participants who participate in each Play It Smart program are helped in identifying their personal skills that they can transfer from athletics to academics through physical activity. This program uses goalsetting to allow targeted participants, typically low income, at-risk youth, to envision possible futures so they may form and create healthy habits to achieve life success. The program also designed ongoing team building and group activities, such as ropes courses, to build group norms and team pride. Program evaluations show very positive results on the students’ academic success. One statistic that proves the success of the program is that 80 percent of the participants enroll in college as compared to 63 percent of the participants’ peers (footballfoundation.org).

The research suggests that four core competencies ought to guide programs that seek to promote individuals’ success in athletics and academics: teambuilding, communication, goalsetting, and self-confidence or positive self. In the area of research, data show that when the athletes join teams; they expand their friendship network. The impact is positive because interaction with non-teammate peers leads to desired cognitive outcomes for all sports (Gaston Gayles, 2009; Larson, 2000). Through team activities, participants also gain a greater understanding of the value of teamwork and utilizing each other’s strengths to reach success. In the area of communication, research shows that programs that seek to develop leadership skills (such as Outward Bound) have positive effects on communication skills. Approximately 77

² The Play It Smart program was started in 1998, and is still in existence today.

percent of Outward Bound participants in one- to two-day programs report gaining communication skills (outwardbound.com). In the area of goalsetting, research finds that student-athletes have fundamental advantages in their “ability to be motivated from within to direct attention and effort toward a challenging goal” (Larson, 2000). Last, in the area of goalsetting and goal-oriented learning, research shows that such positive self-development might take the form of imagining possible selves. The Possible Selves Program has students “think about and describe their hoped-for possible selves, expected possible selves, and feared possible selves” (Hock, 2011).³ Once student participants have determined their possible selves, they create a metaphorical tree that they must nurture by setting goals, making plans to reach the goals, and then actually implementing their plans.

Based on the research consulted in the development of this project, an important factor in creating a one-day program that partners university student-athletes with community youth is to put the former in the role of mentors and academic coaches to allow the youth participants to see their possible selves. The participation of the student-athletes is also beneficial toward the student-athlete in that such “engagement has positive and significant impacts on a set of college outcomes” (Gaston-Gayles, 2009).

The pilot program that emerged out of this research had as its goals to help build basic communication skills for young student-athletes so that they can have stronger, more meaningful interactions with their teachers, parents and peers; to help students build self-esteem through sports specific activities that will have a focus on building self-confidence and high self-esteem;

³ The hoped-for possible selves refer to the student’s wish or dream. The expected possible selves refer to what the student is fairly sure they can create. The feared possible selves is what the student wishes to avoid.

and to include possible selves programming (Hock, 2011) for their cultivation of interpersonal relationships and high self-esteem crucial to a student's success.

Athletic Connections

Athletic Connections third annual event took place April 16, 2016, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Lumbee Field of the University of North Carolina, Pembroke. Student-athlete volunteers signed in at 9:30 a.m., and youth participants checked in beginning at 10 a.m. and received a t-shirt, notepad, pen, tote bag, and nametag. Youth participants attended as part of First Nation Boys & Girls Club, Next Level Sports Academy, Odum Home, Pembroke Boys & Girls Club, Pembroke Housing Authority, and Southern Spirit Boys & Girls Club organizations. Each youth participant was assigned to one of six different teams, each with a different color.

The event commenced with the project coordinator's motivational speech that sought to energize participants and highlight the day's events. Teams (each about 10 participants, supported by two to three mentor-coaches) then divided up and began the event's stations.

- Land Skiing, commonly referred to as the Australian Trolley, splits the team into two separate groups who use two 6-foot-long 2x4 wooden planks with rope handles to complete the obstacles in front of them. The objectives of this station are to encourage teamwork and communication skills in a fun and challenging environment, showing that together great things can be accomplished while also emphasizing that each member on the team plays an important role. The creative building prompt for this particular station was an acrostic poem encouraging the youth participants to use creative problem solving skills in matching words with letters to form a description or story of something or someone close to each individual youth participant.

- Phrase Ball is an activity focused on critical thinking skills, specifically in terms of academia. Youth participants are placed in a circle in which they compile answers on top of one another to create a short story. The creative building prompt for this particular station is encouraging the youth participants to reflect on their healthy habits and how these habits can help ensure their own self-confidence in both positive and trying times.
- Base on Balls is a teambuilding station, charging the teams to determine and develop their own strategy to accomplish the task of going from home plate to first base without ever touching the grass or dirt. To successfully complete the task the teams are provided with bases and the entire team must complete the baseline to score a run. The creative building prompt designated to Base on Balls was a reflective journal entry with the focus on how leadership and teamwork can help each youth participant accomplish their dreams and goals in every realm of their lives.
- Fancy Feet is an activity in which team members are asked to split into pairs to complete the task of moving from one side of an obstacle course to the other. This activity is focused on communication, strategy building, and leadership building as one of the partners is blindfolded and can only move through the obstacle course by listening to their partner for instructions. The creative building prompt for this task revolved around trust, an essential element to successful relationships.
- Tic-Tac-Go revolves around strategy, communication, and teamwork. Team members are split into two teams in which they play a high intensity game of tic-tac-toe and Connect 4 against each other. The creative building prompt for this

station takes the youth participants through the line game. The line game places the entire team in a circle with their notebooks, open, on the ground in front of them. The youth participants are then instructed to draw a random line of any kind on their own notebook paper. Once this step is completed, they must then draw another random line on other team members' notebooks before returning back to their own. After the youth participants return to their notebooks they are encouraged to connect all of the lines in a methodical way to form a picture. The youth participants are provided with color pencils to help them. The line game causes the youth participants to gain an understanding and appreciation for how to manage what seem to be uncontrollable situations. This skill is something that is very useful both in athletics and academics.

- The final station at Athletic Connections, the Blind Side, is a station that uses water and blindfolds to encourage the youth participants to understand the importance of clear communication. The youth participants split into pairs, with one member of each pair wearing a blindfold. The blindfolded member holds two filled water bottles and must listen to her or his partner for directions on how to locate other pairs in the playing area. If the team members do not communicate well, they are sure to get soaked with water. The creative building prompt for this station asked the youth participants to compose a list of individuals whom they can turn to as a support system and to explain every situation for which names are chosen.

Teams engaged in each station for approximately thirty minutes. After Station 2, participants received a free lunch from Jersey Mike's, after which they returned to complete all remaining stations. The event concluded with a motivational speech by Pembroke native Devy

Bell, former head baseball coach at Jordan High School in Durham, North Carolina, and an alumnus of UNC Chapel Hill, where he is the all-time career and single season homerun record holder.

Athletic Connections successfully served forty-four local youth participants from six different organizations. The event's atmosphere at Athletic Connections created by the music, the weather, and the teams that were assigned was a positive factor in the success of the 2016 Athletic Connections event. The event was also well attended by faculty and administration, for the first time in the program's three years of existence. Another highly positive element was the organization of the event and communication between the youth and UNCP student athletes. The elements that showed room for improvement were (1) the timing of the day's events and (2) the implementation of the creative building prompts. Last, the long-term viability of the program requires administrative support in securing youth participants. Athletic Connections is a program that has gained the substantial support of organizations both on- and off-campus, but in order to be sustainable the program must be promoted by university administration. The administration at UNCP has strong ties to the local community and can increase the validity of Athletic Connections. Some local organizations may be skeptical, but it is the opinion of the author that this issue can be resolved and Athletic Connections sustained with the support of UNCP.

Conclusion and Acknowledgements

Youth participants participated in a day of judgment-free physical and critical thinking activities designed to build and enhance specific skills in the core competencies of communication, teambuilding, goalsetting, and self-confidence or positive self needed to succeed both in the classroom and in athletics. By combining sports and physical activity with practice in

writing and personal expression, Athletic Connections fulfilled its major objective to develop and strengthen youth participants' understanding that being successful in school and being physically active is a necessity to reach any dream or goal. Youth participants wrote short journal entries relating to thought-provoking topics that helped them reflect on who they are and how they plan to further accomplish their dreams and aspirations. The UNCP student-athletes served to help answer any questions that could help the youth participants' realize the influence of athletics and academics on their everyday lives.

Awards and Recognitions

Athletic Connections received the Peach Belt Conference SunTrust Bank Connecting Communities Award in 2014 and the UNCP Office of Community & Civic Engagement Making a Difference Award in 2015. In 2016, Athletic Connections was a top three finisher at the Kenan Institute Sport Court sponsored by the Kenan-Flagler School of Business of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Future state

As Athletic Connections continues to grow, it is the vision of the author to see it spread to other universities and colleges in the UNC System as well as to other colleges and universities in the Peach Belt Conference. The event will continue to be held at UNC-Pembroke on an annual basis. The event will be run by a committee of volunteers composed of student-athletes, Esther G. Maynor Honors College members, and those with a common interest in investing in the youth of Pembroke and Robeson County. Athletic Connections is designed to serve up to 150 youth participants at any given event. It can reach this number with the support of the six organizations that attended the 2016 event coupled with the support of UNCP faculty and administration.

To continue enhancing the atmosphere of Athletic Connections, sponsors should have the opportunity to be involved and engaged with Athletic Connections through the "Foul Line." The

“Foul Line” would consist of all the sponsors in attendance and allow them to interact and pass out materials not only to participants of Athletic Connections but also to bystanders. There is also the possibility of partnering with the Brave Buddies program of the UNCP Department of Athletics to take a modified version of Athletic Connections to the local schools once or twice per semester. This modified version would use only two or three stations and would focus on one grade level at a time under the guidance of the trained mentors, UNCP student-athletes.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the UNCP women’s basketball team, the UNCP track and field team, the UNCP spirit squad, Assistant Athletic Director for Compliance and Administration Megan Sanger, and Esther G. Maynor Honors College volunteers for their efforts during the day’s events to ensure the success of the program. Athletic Connections would not have been possible without the sponsorship and financial support of Larry Stone, owner of Pawn Plus; Lindsey Locklear, General Manager of Pembroke True Value; the UNCP Student Government Association; the UNCP Office of Community & Civic Engagement; Parker Watson and Heather Bennett of the Office of Student Involvement & Leadership; and the UNCP athletics department. The lunches provided by Pembroke’s Jersey Mikes Subs exceeded expectations. The positive word of mouth and attendance of the third annual Athletic Connections event by UNCP Provost Zoe Locklear, UNCP Associate Vice Chancellor of Engaged Outreach Cammie Hunt, UNCP Business School interim Dean Stewart Thomas, and UNCP Athletics Director Dick Christy is greatly appreciated. Athletic Connections is currently a part of The Literacy Commons, a unit of the UNCP Office of Engaged Outreach. The Literacy Commons was formerly advised by David Marquard and is currently directed by Scott Hicks. Last, the author gives special thanks to the 2016 keynote Speaker, UNC-CH career and single season homerun record holder Coach Devy Bell. However, Athletic Connections would not have been possible

without the support of incredible friends Cassy Styers and Marcos Simon and a loving family.

Thank you, mother and father, Audra Slavin and Alan Slavin, for your everlasting love.

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