Mutual Benefits of University Athletes Mentoring Elementary Students: Evaluating a University–School District Partnership

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Abstract

This study examined a university–school district partnership intended to increase fourth grade students' awareness of college opportunities and to increase university student–athletes' understanding of the needs in the local community. A mixed methods design was used to evaluate whether the partnership met goals for the fourth grade students, the student–athletes, and teachers that participated. Results indicate student–athletes increased their understanding of their responsibilities as role models and increased their commitment to serving others as an outcome of participating as mentors. The fourth grade teachers reported that their students' participation in the program increased the students' motivation and decreased behavioral issues in the classroom. The fourth grade students reported an increased understanding of the college experience through working with the student–athletes.

Key Words: mentoring, university–school district partnerships, collaboration, athletes, elementary students, mentors, college aspirations, teachers

Introduction

Mentoring has generally been defined in the literature as a supportive relationship between someone who is older and has more experience with someone who is younger, with less experience, and presenting with needs (Black, Grenard,

Sussman, & Rohrbach, 2010). Through the development of the mentoring relationship, ideally, feelings of trust form and there is a mutual respect between mentor and mentee. Mentoring is a learning-centered approach defined by a developmental relationship involving reciprocal learning, goal attainment, and personal growth for all parties involved (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012). A mentor is a supportive person who builds a relationship by offering guidance, support, and encouragement to promote healthy development (Bruce & Bridgefield, 2014). In some situations, these relationships develop naturally, while in others they require structure and support to be maintained. There are two different forms of mentoring relationships, including structured mentoring and informal mentoring. In a learning environment, structured mentoring provides more academic support, while informal mentoring tends to support personal development (Bruce & Bridgefield, 2014).

There are also different types of mentoring processes. The first process is the psychosocial method in which the mentor serves as the counselor, friend, and role model (Campbell et al., 2012). In this method, mentoring focuses on a personal relationship including giving support, teaching skills, having an understanding of the mentee's needs, and providing wisdom. The second process is the career-mentoring model that focuses on networking techniques as well as vocational coaching (Campbell et al., 2012). The career-mentoring model is generally defined as a relationship between a more experienced employee and a less experienced or newly hired employee. This relationship focuses on providing personal and career guidance to improve job satisfaction and success (Omanwa & Musyimi, 2016). Within a school setting, mentoring relationships can be set up formally, with the school organization taking the responsibility to structure the relationship, or informally, which allows those involved to choose their own mentors/mentees and the frequency of meeting. Regardless of the specific mentoring model, determining the benefits of mentoring relationships for both the mentor and the mentee is of considerable interest since, ideally, relationships would provide benefits for both parties, as well as lead to community benefits.

Impact of Mentoring on Mentees

There is considerable support for the idea that participation in a mentoring relationship can have a positive impact on high-risk children. Bruce and Bridgefield (2014) defined high-risk or at-risk youth not by a universal consensus but by responses to risk factors on their surveys, such as incarcerated parents or guardians, regular absenteeism, poor academic performance, behavioral problems in school, delinquency, teenage pregnancy, and homelessness. Campus Corps similarly considered high-risk or at-risk youth to be those at

risk of failing or re-failing, truancy, and substance abuse (Weiler et al., 2013). Evidence exists showing that both formal mentoring relationships (DuBois & Neville, 1997) and natural mentoring relationships between school-based personnel and at-risk children (Black et al., 2010) can have a protective and positive impact on children identified as at-risk.

Rickerson, Kumaran, and Fogarty (2014) reported that after a nine-week session, mentees became more confident in themselves. Positive impacts can be found in several ways, including an increase in feelings of school attachment (Black et al., 2010), a decrease in risk-taking behaviors (Blinn-Pike, 2007), an increase in educational aspirations (Bruce & Bridgefield, 2014; Coller & Kuo, 2013; Collings et al., 2014; DuBois, Portillo, Rhodes, Silverthorn, & Valentine, 2011), and higher job earnings in the future (Klinge, 2015). Even parents of mentees reported observing improvements in motivation and self-esteem (Rickerson et al., 2014). Youth with mentors are also more likely to report engaging in positive behavior through activities such as sports that increase self-esteem and self-confidence (Bruce & Bridgefield, 2014) as well as increased responsibility and integrity (Klinge, 2015). These are important traits that are helpful for building teamwork skills, interest in community work, and overall success in the future. Furthermore, youth involved in mentoring relationships have reported setting higher educational goals such as attending college (Bruce & Bridgefield, 2014).

A meta-analysis by Dubois, Holloway, Valentine, and Cooper (2002) which included 55 research articles found that youth from backgrounds of environmental risk and disadvantage are likely to benefit the most from mentoring relationships. Based on the results, Dubois et al. created recommendations for best practices, including the monitoring of program implementation, screening of prospective mentors, supervision, and structured activities for mentors and youth. A more recent meta-analysis by DuBois et al. (2011) included 73 studies and found benefits of mentorship relationships, particularly when mentors and mentees were grouped by similar interests. That review specifically reported on benefits in the area of cognitive development, describing that youth were seen to have new thinking skills. They also noted that mentees were more receptive to adult advice and values after participation in mentorship programs.

Much attention has been given to formal mentorship program outcomes, such as Big Brothers/Big Sisters. For example, Rhodes, Grossman, and Resch (2000) examined a large sample of adolescents who participated in the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program over a period of 18 months, hypothesizing that the impact of the mentoring relationship could improve parental relationships, which in turn could improve academic performance. Results indicated that improvements in parental relationships were important mediators for

improvement in the mentee's perceptions of scholastic competence and decreases in unexcused absences. The authors reported that the mentoring relationship from someone outside of the family may impact and allow for improvements in the quality of parent–child relationships.

DuBois and Neville (1997) examined the Big Brothers/Big Sisters program and a program through a service learning experience at a university to investigate the differences between these two different types of mentoring programs from the perspective of the mentor. The mentors from the university concentrated more on the academic success of their match, while the mentors from Big Brothers/Big Sisters were involved in more global aspects of their mentee's life. It was found that the more mentor–youth contact and emotional closeness between mentor and mentee, the greater the benefits were for the youth. The benefits of mentoring have also been described as something that can be carried throughout a person's life, impacting their success in future endeavors (McDonald & Lambert, 2014).

Utilizing University Students as Mentors

Despite the documented benefits of mentorship programs, many children do not have an opportunity to receive the benefits of a mentor. In fact, in one survey of adolescents, more than one in three participants reported never having a mentor or a positive mentoring experience (Bruce & Bridgefield, 2014). It is possible that the university student population may be an underutilized resource for the establishment of mentoring relationships with at-risk youth. College students have been reported to volunteer more often than adults because volunteer activities, such as mentoring, are directly related to formal study, social development, and career enhancement (Kowal, 2007).

Several university–school district community mentoring programs have been described in the literature, including partnerships designed to introduce STEM disciplines within a large, urban, predominantly low-income school district (Ferreira, 2007) and a longitudinal study of the impact on middle and high school underrepresented gifted children (Clasen, 2006). More recently, Coller and Kuo (2013) utilized UCLA undergraduates to provide a mentorship program in a Los Angeles Title I elementary school. Qualitative findings suggested improvements in attitudes, classroom behavior, and attendance. These studies express the increased need for improving support of low-income, minority students, as well as increasing educational opportunities and partnerships.

Impact of Mentoring on University Students

While there is much focus in the literature on the impact of mentoring relationships on the mentee, there also is an emerging literature about the impact

of mentoring on the mentor. College students' involvement in mentoring relationships can contribute to the development of the mentor's leadership skills. Campbell et al. (2012) documented increases in leadership values such as commitment, collaboration, and consciousness of self. It was also reported that adult mentors were able to gain a better understanding of their own experiences as children (Blinn-Pike, 2007) while understanding inequalities in society and increasing awareness of their privileged upbringing (Hughes et al., 2012).

More generally, research documenting the impact of community service and service learning outcomes for college students has indicated that participation in service learning can increase the university students' awareness of the community and community problems (Astin & Sax, 1998; Hughes et al., 2012; Klinge, 2015), increase sensitivity to diversity (Driscoll, Holland, Gelmon, & Kerrigan, 1996), challenge negative stereotypes (Hughes, Walsh, Mayer, Bolay, & Southard, 2010), and increase undergraduate student's self-efficacy, self-esteem, and sense of purpose (Klinge, 2015; Weiler et al., 2013). Moreover, mentors reported a gain in interaction skills and development of a more positive view of younger generations (Evans, 2005). Results from a meta-analysis of the impact of service learning on college students that included 62 studies indicated that benefits for college students were seen in the areas of attitudes toward school and self, civic engagement, social skills, and academic achievement (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). A study examining the benefits of a mentoring program between first-year undergraduates and second- and third-year undergraduates revealed that all involved reported improved academic achievement, social integration, goal commitment, and reduced dropout rates (Collings et al., 2014). Bringle and Steinberg's (2010) research review further noted that participation in service learning increased self-efficacy and future commitment to service and may have an impact on future employment choices. Overall, there is support for the idea that participation in service programs is a powerful predictor of gains in socially responsible leadership skills (Dugan & Komives, 2010), academic development, and civic responsibility (Astin & Sax, 1998; Hughes et al., 2012).

Factors for Success in Mentor–Mentee Relationships

While the creation of mentoring relationships between adults and children can be very beneficial, it is important to understand the factors that contribute to failures in mentoring relationships and mentoring programs in order to better understand the elements necessary for success. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) reported that approximately half of all mentoring relationships disintegrate within a few months of creation.

Karcher, Nakkula, and Harris (2005) conducted two studies in an attempt to understand why some mentor–mentee relationships persist while other relationships are not successful. Findings indicated that the mentors' perceptions of the quality of the relationship were related to the mentors' feeling of being needed or helpful to the mentee. The mentee's risk status did not contribute significantly to the mentor's perception of the relationship. Karcher et al. discussed implications of these findings: training for mentors should focus less on preparing mentors for the risk status of the mentees and more on increasing their self-efficacy about their mentoring abilities and responsibilities. The importance of ongoing support for mentors throughout the process was also discussed.

Spencer (2007) provided information from a qualitative study on the factors that may impact mentor–mentee relationship failures. The author conducted in-depth interviews with 20 adults and 11 adolescent participants in a community-based mentoring program to determine reasons that the relationship between mentor and mentee was not successful. The following six themes were identified: (a) perceived abandonment of the mentor or mentee, (b) perceived lack of mentee motivation, (d) unfulfilled expectations particularly from the mentors in regards to the ease of which relationships could be established, (d) inadequacies of relationship or communication skills of the mentor, including an inability to bridge cultural differences, (e) family interference, and (f) inadequate support from the agency.

Coller and Kuo (2013) examined the frequent challenges of a school-based mentorship program in Los Angeles. While examining the mentoring relationship of high-risk elementary students (more susceptible to negative influences of tobacco/alcohol use and violence), authors found it difficult to successfully pair mentors with mentees, as well as to monitor the activities used for relationship building despite having a set criteria and training for eligible mentors and mentees. Coller and Kuo's findings suggested that successful relationships between mentors and mentees can be determined by setting clear visit expectations, focusing on building trust and friendship, recruiting mentors with experience working with children, providing adequate mentor orientation and ongoing training (a 3-hour training program was provided), and facilitating mentors' feelings of effectiveness.

In order to increase the effectiveness of mentoring programs, Klinge (2015) created a framework specifically for providing mentoring in a learning organization such as an elementary school setting. Klinge suggested first creating a mentoring plan assessing the overall goals and needs of the organization or school, then assessing individuals' readiness to make a change, learn, and grow. Before beginning the formal mentoring program, Klinge found it beneficial to provide an orientation to allow for further evaluation to ensure matching

between mentor and mentee was appropriate and to facilitate conversations about common interests to build a strong foundational relationship. The final recommendation was to create an agreement between the mentor and mentee, selecting time, frequency, and activities.

Mutual Benefits of University–School Partnerships

Bringle and Steinberg (2010) reported that only a few empirical articles have examined the impact of service learning on the community partners that receive the services. One such study by Ferreira (2007) found that teachers gained information about novel pedagogical approaches in their STEM classrooms through a university–school partnership, including the use of new technologies, experiments, and demonstrations to deliver content. While collaboration between universities and local school districts can be a win–win for both the schools and the universities, there are critical elements that should be considered in establishing effective partnerships that have mutual benefits. For example, Clarken (1999) described a collaboration facilitation guide and checklist that can be used to determine readiness, including: trust, responsibility, time, commitment, accountability, reciprocity, feelings of ownership in the process, shared vision, openness to growth, communication, respect, and adaptability.

Several authors have highlighted the elements needed for success in these partnerships. Examples include a partnership with a clearly defined purpose and direction (Essex, 2001), the need to have key stakeholders in leadership positions (superintendents, principals, etc.) on board with the reform efforts and initiatives in the schools (Essex, 2001; Myran, Crum, & Clayton, 2010; Rakow & Robinson, 1992), and the need to find a balance between theory and practice. The importance of developing and maintaining an effective communication system with trust and mutual respect is also deemed to be vital for success (Essex, 2001; Myran et al., 2010). Finally, Essex (2001) highlighted the need for the partnership to provide tangible benefits for both the university and the school district, which Klinge (2015) observed to be cost effectiveness, increased trust, motivation, improved planning, enthusiasm, and benefits in future collaboration, while examining overall learning organization benefits and outcomes.

A common barrier to effective partnerships includes insufficient staff time to devote to the activities of the partnership (Mincemoyer, 2002) as well as meeting the time criteria put into place (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013). Day (1998) investigated the impact, benefits, and obstacles in seven different university–school partnerships in Sweden. Across all of the projects, it was noted that teachers' normal work conditions made it difficult for them to focus on their own professional development and learning. Another finding was

the importance of putting into place safeguards to ensure that the partnership could be maintained long term. Recommendations included having universities become more of a part of the school community and promoting and sustaining reflective conversations. Given this recommendation, there should also be time devoted for collaborative experiences between school staff and university personnel (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Scannapieco and Painter (2013) also found that many mentors in their program only committed to six months or less, not giving the necessary buy-in to run a long-lasting program. Although findings were still beneficial for those that participated, increased success has been attributed to greater length of participation.

When creating these partnerships, it is of critical importance to create and utilize a systematic process of evaluating the university–school district partnership to determine whether the partnership is producing desired results (Klinge, 2015; Sabateli & Anderson, 2005). The current study was designed to examine a mentoring program from several perspectives to determine whether there are benefits for all involved in the process, including mentors, mentees, the university, and the local school district. The goal was to understand the benefits and obstacles of a university–school district partnership that paired university student–athletes with fourth grade students for an entire school year. The two research questions that guided the study were:

1. Does involvement in a mentoring program produce benefits to university student–athletes who participate as mentors?
2. Does involvement in a mentoring program increase fourth grade children's understanding of college and the college experience?

Method

Program Description

As part of a larger university–school district partnership designed to promote collaboration within these community agencies, university student–athletes and fourth grade students in a local elementary school were paired together to form mentoring relationships. The program was designed collaboratively between the athletic department of the university and the fourth grade teachers in the elementary school. The main goal of the program was to provide mutual benefits both for university participants (mentors) and the school-aged children attending the local elementary school (mentees). Additional goals were to provide service opportunities to university students and increase awareness of the overall college experience for fourth grade children. The local school district is considered a high-needs district, with 78% of the children speaking Spanish as a first language and approximately 90% of children considered to be

economically disadvantaged (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Because many of the children who attend the elementary school do not have parents who have attended college, a key goal was for these students to gain awareness of the opportunities and experiences related to college.

The development of this specific program began with the university athletics program expressing an interest in providing service opportunities for student–athletes beyond the mandatory service requirements for all undergraduate students as part of the general education curriculum. This fits with overall goals of the athletic department of developing student–athletes into leaders and role models. While student–athletes were not specifically required to participate in this service program, they do have service requirements from the athletics department. Those student–athletes who participated in this program chose participation as mentors over other service options.

Fourth grade classrooms in the local elementary school were selected to participate in this program based on the interest of the fourth grade teachers in collaborating with the university to allow student–athletes to visit the classrooms and work with children once per week, making this group a convenience sample. However, it was hypothesized that children at this age might especially benefit from having university students as mentors before beginning middle school. Trusty, Niles, and Carney (2005) stress the importance of engaging in a comprehensive educational and career planning process for children by middle school.

University student–athletes from each sport (typically 10–14 athletes per week), for the majority of one full school year, visited two out of four total fourth grade classrooms in one elementary school. The athletic department and individual coaches encouraged participation in this program, although athletes had other options for completing their service requirements. Many of the participating student–athletes did attend every week, although this tended to vary depending upon whether the athletes were in their sports season. As this particular service requirement was not mandated for the athletes, those athletes that attended were especially interested in working with children in schools.

Each week, student–athletes first spent time discussing their college academic and athletic experiences and answering questions from students about the college experience. They then participated with the children in a classroom activity that included reading, math games, or science projects designed by the classroom teacher. The exact nature of the activities varied week by week based on the teacher's lesson plans for the week. The teachers also paired the student–athletes with the children to assist them with activities either individually or in small groups. The classroom teachers attempted to pair student–athletes up with the same small group of children each week, although this varied to some degree each week based on student absences and student–athlete participation.

While student–athletes were not required to attend a training before beginning in this program, they did have a brief 20-minute orientation about the mentoring program goals and the expectations for them as potential role models for the children. The student–athletes were encouraged to spend time each week with the children discussing the college experience and stressing the importance of working hard to meet goals. They typically spent about two hours per week in the classroom. This program culminated when the fourth grade students traveled to the university campus at the end of the school year to participate in a full day of activities including lunch in the dining hall, a tour of campus, and participation in a writing experience with the student–athletes.

Program Goals

Goals for the *fourth grade students* included the following:
- increasing awareness of opportunities available to students to attend college
- increasing awareness of the college experience as a whole
- creating motivation for children to create goals of attending college in the future

Goals for the *university student–athletes* included the following:
- increasing understanding of their responsibilities to be role models to younger children
- increasing understanding of the needs of children in the local community
- developing the desire to continue participation in service activities

Participants

Participants in this study included two general education teachers and one special education teacher from the local school district, 65 university student–athletes (mentors), and 48 fourth grade students (mentees). A survey was sent electronically to 146 student–athletes, and 76 responded (52%). The survey about participation in this mentoring program was embedded in a more global survey about their student–athlete experience. Sixty-five student–athletes responded specifically to the set of 16 questions within the survey related to their experience serving as mentors for the fourth grade children. All of the sports teams available on campus (12 teams) were represented by the student–athletes who participated as mentors. Of the relevant respondents, 32% were male, and 68% were female. Approximately 29% of respondents were freshmen, 25% were sophomores, 34% were juniors, and 12% were seniors.

Forty-eight fourth grade students completed open-ended surveys about their experiences in the program. Of these participants, 62% of the children spoke English as a second language. The mean age of the fourth grade participants was 9.7 with a range of age between 9 and 11.

Two general education fourth grade teachers and one special education teacher, who was assigned to one of the classrooms for inclusion support, each participated in a semi-structured, individual interview about their experiences with the program. Each teacher was asked about their overall experiences with the program throughout the year, strengths of the program, weaknesses of the program, and suggestions for improving the program for the following year. All three teachers were participating in the program for the second year and had several years of teaching experience.

Measures

The program was evaluated in a mixed methods design to determine whether the program met goals for both the university student–athletes and the fourth grade children. All student–athletes were asked to complete a forced-choice survey about their experiences serving as mentors to the fourth grade students. The survey questions asked about the impact of the experience on the athletes in the following areas: (1) their view of themselves as role models; (2) the positive development of their communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills; (3) their desire to work with underprivileged children/adults in the future; (4) any increase in their cultural and ethnic/racial understanding; (5) any increase in their sense of social responsibility and citizenship; and (6) their interest in continuing to mentor children in this program in the future.

Two general education and one special education teacher participated in an exit interview at the end of the school year. They were asked the following open-ended questions, with follow-up questions as appropriate based on each teacher's responses:

• Tell us about your overall experience working with the student–athletes from the university.
• What have the students in your class gained from having student–athletes visit?
• What have you gained from having student–athletes visit your class?
• What are some strengths and weaknesses of this program?
• Do you have any suggestions to improve the program?

The fourth grade students completed a survey during their visit to the university campus, answering questions about their day on the university campus, about the experience of having student–athletes visit their classroom each week, and about what they enjoyed the most about participation in the program. The children were also asked to rate how they felt about the importance of doing well in school currently and attending college in the future on a three-point Likert scale (very important, important, not that important). The children's

teachers, research assistants, and three student–athletes who volunteered to help monitor the children during their day on campus assisted those children who needed help with completing the open-ended questions by writing down their verbal responses to questions. Approximately five children needed assistance with writing their responses.

Procedure

Two graduate students in school psychology and the lead author (all female) independently coded the children's responses, utilizing an inductive approach, to identify themes of the children's responses. They completed the task independently and then compared results utilizing a grounded theory approach originally described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and updated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). Finally, the lead author read each child's survey responses and compiled a narrative summary of the thematic categories that emerged. The three teacher interviews were transcribed and analyzed in a similar way.

Results

Student–Athlete Surveys

The student–athletes reported a positive impact from participation in this program (approximately 80% of respondents selected either Strongly Agree or Moderately Agree for most of the questions). Table 1 provides details of the response rates for all survey questions. Univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) indicated differences in their perceptions of their experiences by grade level (freshman–senior) for two questions. Student–athletes were asked whether participation in this service project increased commitment to providing service to others [$F(4, 60) = 4.098$, $p < .05$]. Post hoc analyses using Tukey's HSD indicated freshmen student–athletes (M = 4.72, sd = .669) were more likely than athletes in upper grades to feel that the project increased commitment to providing service to others. Additionally, a significant difference between grade level was found when student–athletes were asked about intentions to volunteer in the future [$F(4, 60) = 2.573$, $p < .05$]. Freshmen student–athletes (M = 4.22, sd = 1.00) were more likely to indicate that they would volunteer in the community in the future than seniors (M = 3.87, sd = 1.12). Table 2 provides information about the athletes' responses regarding the likelihood of participating in a similar program in the future.

Table 1. Student–Athlete Survey Responses Regarding Impact of Participation in Mentoring Program

Survey Questions Participation in this service project….	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Neutral	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Had a positive effect on my beliefs about my abilities to make a difference in the lives of others	66%	26%	8%	0%	0%
Increased my view of myself as a role model for others	74%	20%	6%	0%	0%
Had a positive impact on my moral development.	63%	26%	9%	2%	0%
Led to the positive development of my interpersonal skills	63%	25%	11%	2%	0%
Led to the positive development of my communication skills	65%	26%	8%	2%	0%
Led to the positive development of my leadership skills.	68%	23%	9%	0%	0%
Increased my cultural and racial understanding	62%	20%	18%	0%	0%
Assisted in reducing stereotypes that I may hold	43%	23%	29%	5%	0%
Increased my sense of citizenship	52%	23%	22%	3%	0%
Increased my commitment to providing service to others	65%	20%	12%	3%	0%
Increased my sense of social responsibility	60%	23%	17%	3%	0%
Has fostered a sense of community amongst other student–athletes on my sports team	62%	25%	12%	0%	2%
Has fostered a sense of community amongst other student–athletes from different sports teams	60%	23%	14%	0%	3%

Table 2. Student–Athlete Survey Responses Regarding Likelihood of Participation in Similar Programs in the Future

Survey Questions Indicate how likely you would be to engage in the stated activities:	Strongly Agree	Moderately Agree	Neutral	Moderately Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I will continue to volunteer in this program in the future	59%	22%	17%	3%	0%
I will seek out an opportunity to volunteer within the local community in the future	35%	26%	29%	9%	0%
I will seek out opportunities to work with children through involvement in sports clinics/sports summer camps or in other capacities in which I can share my skills in the sport	60%	25%	14%	3%	2%
I will continue to seek out opportunities to share my experiences as a student–athlete with children	66%	20%	12%	2%	0%

Teacher Interviews

The teacher interviews revealed that the teachers, in general, felt that there were many strengths of the program. Teacher responses were categorized, and five themes emerged from the responses. First, the teachers reported that the children gained valuable information about college and learned that college is accessible to anyone regardless of background. According to one teacher, "a big strength was the positivity surrounding the children, letting them know that college is possible" and "it is nice for students to see someone that went to college other than the teachers because it shows them all of the opportunities that life holds." Second, children learned that hard work and dedication can assist in reaching goals. All three teachers interviewed noted that the student–athletes often spoke about goal-setting and working hard to reach those goals. The teachers reported using the same type of language throughout the week to remind students to give their best effort on tasks. According to one of the teachers, "it was great to refer back on during the week when a student might not have been following directions or completing the work. It was good to remind them what the college athletes said about setting goals to go to college."

A third theme that emerged from the interviews with teachers was that children gained confidence and "they were able to get a better sense of a future for themselves." The special education teacher involved in this project made particular mention of the impact of the program on the confidence of her students

in special education: "My kids in particular lack confidence. They don't like to speak up or get involved generally, but the athletes were great at working with them. It was really a boost to their confidence."

Fourth, the teachers also reported that the children's behavior in class all week improved as the teachers used Friday participation in the sessions with the university student–athletes as a reward for their positive participation and behavior in class throughout the week. One teacher indicated, "students were very motivated to participate in the program each Friday, [such] that I saw an increase in their assignment completion and on-task behavior."

Finally, the children looked forward to working with the student–athletes every Friday. One teacher gave the following response about the enthusiasm of the children about the program: "Every Friday the kids were asking about it. It was something they really looked forward to. They looked at the student–athletes like celebrities and even got their autographs."

The teachers also indicated areas of improvement that might benefit the program in the future. Suggestions included the following:

- If possible, it would be helpful to have the same student–athletes come each week.
- If the same number of student–athletes could come each week, it would allow teachers to effectively plan the number of groups needed and what types of activities to use for the sessions.
- Allow for all fourth grade students in the school to participate in the program.

Fourth Grade Student Surveys

The fourth grade students overwhelmingly reported that they enjoyed and gained valuable information from working with the student–athletes during the year. When asked open-ended questions about what they learned from participation in the weekly program, 35% of students reported learning about how to prepare for college, 29% of students reported learning about the value of hard work in academics, and 22% of students reported learning about college in general. Many students made comments such as, "they taught us so much about school and about college and about what we have do to go to college," and "I learned that if I work hard and study and practice that I can get good grades and go to college." Similarly, when the children were asked about what they learned from their visit to the university campus, the children indicated that they learned about college, career goals, extracurricular activities, the history of the particular university, and about life on a college campus (see Table 3; note that not every student completed every question).

Table 3. Thematic Categories of Fourth Grade Children's Responses

Thematic Category	Responses/ Category	Sample Responses
Q1: What did you learn from the college students who visited you at school? (*N* = 49)		
Preparing for College (scholarships, costs, grades)	35%	"I learned that we need to give effort and enjoy. We need to get good grades and be happy, not sad, and teamwork."
Value of Hard Work (academics)	29%	"I learned that you need good grades to get into college and to stay focused."
Learned About College Students/College Students' Majors	22%	"I learned that at college they have majors which are for something you want to be when you grow up."
Miscellaneous (nice, helpful, important)	18%	"That going to college is a big important thing to do if you want to get a good job."
Learned About Extra Curricular Activities/ Sports	16%	"What I learned about the students is some play soccer, volleyball, and basketball, but some just do psychology."
Info About University	8%	"What I learned was this is an amazing college."
Life on Campus (dining hall, dorms)	8%	"We learned that you could live at college."
Q2: What did you learn about college from spending the day on campus? (*N* = 49)		
Info About University (history)	35%	"That this whole college was someone's mansion, and he sold it for one dollar, because he was mad at his son for who he married."
Learned About Extra Curricular Activities/ Sports	27%	"I learned that you get to play sports, eat, and exercise."
Hard Work (academics)	24%	"I learned that you should work hard and practice, and to always do the best you can."
Life on Campus (dining hall, dorms)	20%	"Today I learned about where they get to live and get lunch. It was awesome."
Fun (college is fun)	14%	"That college is a fun place to be after you graduate high school."
Learned About College Students/College Students' Majors	4%	"Today we learned that some students do not play sports. Also, we learned what the students want to be when they grow up."
Q3: What did you learn about participation in sports from the athletes that visited you at school?" (*N* = 48)		
Learned About Extra Curricular Activities (lots of options; don't have to play sports)	46%	"I learned that you do not need to play sports in college in order to go, and that you need a back-up plan."

Table 3, continued

Hard Work (always try your best, academics)	19%	"I learned that you have to put your mind to things and never give up, like on basketball, football, soccer, and other great things."
Teamwork	17%	"What I learned about participation in sports is that you can't give up on your team and that you have to have fun."
Miscellaneous (trainer, uniforms)	17%	"I learned that the basketball team is good and has nice uniforms."
College Is Fun	15%	"I learned participating in sports in college is fun because you play with your friends."
Success/Winning	8%	"I learned about getting really good at certain sports."
Q4: What did you enjoy about visiting the university campus? (*N* = 48)		
Campus (scenery, history, dorm life)	48%	"I enjoyed walking around campus and seeing all the beautiful sights."
Students and Campus Involvement	23%	"We enjoyed it when we could work together, talk about ourselves, and do different things together."
Food (lunch, eating in dining hall)	21%	"What I enjoyed about visiting the campus was eating at the buffet."
Fun Participating in Activities on Campus With Students	19%	"It was cool meeting with the student–athletes because they are funny, and I enjoyed having fun with them.
Miscellaneous (got to leave school early, etc.)	19%	"What I enjoyed about the athletes was, when it was Friday, we learned about planets."
Q5: What was it like to meet with the student athletes? What did you enjoy about it? (*N* = 49)		
Fun	29%	"It was amazing to meet with the student–athletes. It was so fun to meet with them."
Working Together	25%	"It was a great experience to meet the student–athletes. I enjoyed working with them and getting to know them."
Classroom Learning	22%	"We got to do science, and they told us their names."
Preparing for College (majors, extracurriculars, general information about college)	16%	"Meeting the student–athletes made me learn about what I want to do when I grow up."
Excitement for College	12%	"I enjoyed how much we learned about college; I never felt so excited about it."
Meeting New People	8%	"I liked to meet college student–athletes; it was very exciting to meet new people every Friday."

The fourth grade children were also asked on the survey about the importance of doing well in school and attending college in the future. When asked about the importance of doing well in school, 86% of children indicated that it was very important, 10% of children indicated it was important, and 4% of children indicated it was not that important to do well in school. The children were also asked about the importance of going to college, and 80% of children indicated that it was very important to attend college, 16% indicated that it was important, and 4% indicated that it was not that important to attend college.

Discussion

Program Benefits

Results of the mixed methods design suggest that student–athletes increased their understanding of their responsibilities as role models and of the needs of children in the local community and developed a desire to continue service activities. These findings are consistent with those of previous research studies such as those reported by Astin and Sax (1998), Hughes et al. (2012), and Klinge (2015) that found an increase in awareness of the community and community problems while increasing future commitment to service.

The student–athletes seemed to view themselves as role models and reported positive development in their communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills. Student–athletes also reported a desire to work with underprivileged children/adults in the future—specifically, through mentoring—as they had an increase in their sense of social responsibility and citizenship. Freshmen were more likely to indicate a desire to participate in such community outreach programs in the future, perhaps because they have more years left in college to participate as opposed to students who are graduating and planning for careers. There were also reports of an increase in cultural and racial understanding.

The fourth grade students gained an understanding about preparing for college and developed an increased awareness that hard work and dedication can help accomplish goals for academic success. They learned that college is accessible to everyone regardless of their backgrounds. Overall, the fourth grade students reported increased understanding of the college experience through working with the student–athletes. Similar to McDonald and Lambert's (2014) research on mentoring during a critical time of development, 80% of fourth grade students in our current study reported that they believed attending college was very important, suggesting that mentoring may have been a turning point providing necessary skills and an increased desire to attend college.

The fourth grade teachers reported that classroom behavior improved as fourth grade students were looking forward to the student–athletes' visits. The

teachers had a positive attitude toward the program and felt that it resulted in an increase in motivation and decrease in behavioral issues in the classes, similar to the findings in Coller and Kuo's (2013) research. The teachers, in fact, expressed interest in having the program expand so that more children in their school could benefit.

Barriers to Success/Suggestions for Program Improvement

As the participating teachers indicated in their interviews, there was some concern with the lack of consistency of the mentors who participated in the program on a week-to-week basis, which was also a concern in DuBois and Neville's (1997) study that recommended consistency to provide more contact and emotional closeness between the mentor and mentee. While approximately 10–14 student–athletes participated each week in the program, they were not always the same student–athletes. This was impacted by factors such as whether the particular athlete's sport was in season which resulted in more demands on that athlete's time. This lack of consistency likely impacted the ability for the mentors and mentees to develop meaningful relationships, and it was specifically addressed by program organizers at the end of the first year of implementation to determine ways to ensure more consistency in student–athlete involvement on a weekly basis.

Future additions to the program will provide a mechanism for ongoing support for the mentors. This could include monthly group meetings with university staff and the student–athletes to discuss the mentoring relationships with the children and to address any specific concerns. Coller and Kuo (2013) found that providing such ongoing support to mentors positively affected the success of the mentor–mentee relationship and gave mentors a feeling of effectiveness, thus increasing their motivation and desire to continue service. Increased check-ins throughout the program with the participating teachers could also ensure that any of their concerns or suggestions about the program are addressed in a timely manner. Finally, as noted by the teachers, the program could be expanded to include all fourth grade children in the school, as opposed to only two classes. The school has requested this expansion of the program, highlighting how they have valued the mentoring program for their students.

Study Limitations

The majority of the data collected for this study occurred at the end of the school year, so the information captured in interviews and surveys just examined the perspective of the participants at one point in time—at the end of the experience. Future research might focus on gathering snapshots of the participants' experiences throughout the duration of the school year to determine

whether there are any changes in perspectives as the mentors and mentees become more familiar with one another. Additionally, with only 52% of the university student–athletes responding to the survey, it is important to consider whether those who responded to the survey were those that were more interested or engaged in the mentoring partnership, which may have inflated their ratings of the experience. While teachers provided anecdotal evidence that this program reduced behavioral referrals and increased on-task behaviors of the children in their classes, future research on this program could include student outcome data. While the teachers' perspectives that this program assisted with their classroom behavior management is important information as it speaks to the teachers' perceptions of this program as a successful and worthwhile endeavor, it would be beneficial to collect student behavior data in the future. To this end, on-site observations of student behavior and of the weekly sessions in the classrooms could provide valuable data on both the process and content of the mentoring relationships.

Conclusions

University–school partnerships have the potential to provide mutual benefits both for the university and its students and their community partners. This program provides evidence of benefits received by the university student–athletes, the children in the schools, and the classroom teachers. The program is ongoing with plans to further expand the number of mentors provided and to evaluate its impact and effectiveness on an ongoing basis. It has the potential to lay the groundwork for future expansion of partnership activities between the school district and the university, given the conduits for communication that have been established.

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