Impact of a Service Learning Sport for Development Program

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Introduction

Sport-for-Development (SFD) approaches have introduced mechanisms for sport to promote social change by facilitating appropriate developmental environments (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). An increasing number of SFD interventions have attempted to address issues of social inequality (Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011). Many SFD programs are implemented without assessing communities’ needs (Vail, 2007) and have not been evaluated (Levermore, 2008). As a result, questions remain concerning the legitimacy of sport as an agent of positive social change (Coalter, 2010). Additionally, while SFD concepts have been used around the world, they have not been widely adopted in the US (Coakley, 2004). Thus, evaluations of US SFD programs are needed to understand the impact of interventions and inform management processes.

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of College Bound, a SFD service-learning event where sport management undergraduates from Y-University (YU), a large urban state university, engaged with students at Park Elementary (PE), a low income, high minority urban school. PE stakeholders collectively indicated that accessibility to higher education was the primary constraint faced by youth in their community. Access to higher education has been cited as a critical mechanism for social mobility (Turcios-Cotta & Milan, 2013). Although access to higher education has increased, minority groups remain underrepresented (Turcios-Cotto & Milan, 2013). Furthermore, racial and ethnic minorities who do attend college are still far less likely to complete their degree (Brock, 2010). As a result, College Bound was developed in 2012 to utilize sport activities to promote social development initiatives, while specifically focusing on empowering elementary school students to overcome barriers to higher education. This study examined the impact of the inaugural event on PE students, specifically related to their perceptions of higher education and influence of personal interactions with college students.

Methods

Considering the sensitivity of young children to contextual distractions (Pellegrini, Hoch, & Symons, 2013), collecting reflective qualitative data from YU undergraduates and PE teachers was selected as the most reliable and valid method for this study. College students completed a voluntary nine item open-ended survey probing the impact of College Bound, and submitted reflection journals which prompted them to relate issues discussed in class to their experience at the event. Of the 53 students enrolled in the course, 44 completed voluntary open-ended surveys, and 48 submitted journals. Data were also collected through surveys completed by 52 teachers at PE who attended College Bound with their students. Teacher surveys included a combination of open-ended and 5-point Likert-scaled questions related to the perceived impact of College Bound on elementary students, the effectiveness of the event, and suggestions for future events.

Data were entered verbatim and cleaned of all identifiable indicators. The analysis followed an iterative constant comparison procedure (Henderson, 2006), and a grounded theory process (Strauss, 1998) was adapted to classify respondents’ descriptions of program impacts. Initial open coding resulted in the recognition of respondents’ perception of how College Bound had positively impacted PE students. Axial coding was conducted to reconcile open codes based on patterns observed across the data. Representative verbatim quotations from the surveys and journals were used to the support the identified themes.
Results

Data from YU students and PE teachers suggested College Bound had a positive impact on the perceptions of higher education amongst PE students. The activities allowed elementary students to participate in sports they had not previously been exposed to (e.g., rugby, tennis), which emphasized teamwork and communication with college undergraduates. These collaborations enhanced PE students’ awareness of post-secondary opportunities and understanding of the variety of opportunities within the college environment. This process helped them develop a more substantial interest in college overall. Similarly, PE students demonstrated stronger motivations to attend college and were better able to clarify and articulate their goals related to higher education based on their interaction with YU students through sport. Many YU undergraduates and PE teachers referred to the event as a “turning point” for PE students who had previously not seen college as a realistic opportunity. Respondents also noted College Bound exposed youth to unique positive messages they do not regularly receive related to higher education within their own community, and provided access to information which legitimized college as an accessible and enjoyable environment.

The impact of this event was enhanced by the tangible connections between YU and PE students. PE students bonded and related to college students during sport activities, which helped establish concrete positive feelings and experiences related to higher education. YU undergraduates believed this level of personal interaction was instrumental to making higher education “real” to PE students. The YU students appreciated the relationships they established throughout the event, and noticed many PE students felt comfortable asking them about college life. This inquisitive behavior was also observed by PE teachers, who noticed their students were excited and engaged by the presence of college students. Teachers also specifically noted the importance of these personal connections for PE youth without family members in higher education or parents that regularly discuss college opportunities. It was also important to note that many of the YU students suggested the event changed their own perspectives about social issues they were not aware of previously. This experience seemed to serve as a catalyst to seeking ways to use their roles as sport managers to address social issues in the future.

Discussion

Results offered preliminary support regarding the efficacy of SFD models focused on targeted social goals. Respondents indicated College Bound facilitated a positive reciprocal environment, which inspired and empowered students to pursue higher education on their own accord. In this sense, sport became a safe space to engage in critical dialogue about social change. By using sport as a catalyst for conversation and social connection, as opposed to simply playing or teaching sport skills, the SFD approach contrasted with traditional structures of sport programs employed in the U.S., which have been critiqued for enabling what Coalter (2010) described as “new forms of dependency” (p. 1386). This study assessed the impact of a singular event focused primarily on alleviating barriers to higher education. However, SFD models have been applied to programs (i.e. afterschool networks), and have been linked with broader outcomes, such as developing social capital (Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008) and community capacity building (Moscardo, 2007). These frameworks require further evaluation to inform practitioners of efficient practices, and raise awareness amongst funders and policymakers. In addition, YU students indicated that College Bound influenced them professionally, and indicated a commitment to social equality and inclusion in their careers. With the increasing demand for socially informed sport professionals (Light, 2007), these results are practically significant. Service-learning may be a viable mechanism to not only leverage sport for developmental outcomes, but also raise social consciousness amongst future sport practitioners.