

C.A.M.P. Gator: Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program

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Abstract

CAMP (Collegiate Athlete Mentoring Program) Gator is a leadership-mentoring program in which collegiate athletes and student leaders serve as mentors to at-risk students. The hallmark of the program is leadership training that mentors and mentees complete collaboratively; creating mission and vision statements, partaking in service leadership projects, and even the creation of a leadership skills video. Participants in the pilot program experienced increased GPA's, decreased school suspensions, increased confidence, and enhanced public speaking ability.

Purpose

There is a dire need for school principals and educational leaders not only in the state of Florida, but also in school districts throughout the nation (Florida Department of Education, 2007). Whitaker (2001) reported that 90% of the district superintendents surveyed indicated a "moderate to extreme shortage of principal candidates." Even more startling is the decline in the number of educational leaders that match the racial, ethnic, and socio-economic background of the student population (National Center for Education Statistics, as cited in Taylor & Whittaker, 2003).

Furthermore, research has shown that the children in our nations' schools, especially those who are minorities or poor, face many challenges in terms of

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academics, health, and support at home. According to the study done analyzing the impact of Big Brothers Big Sisters (2000), one in four children today are raised in single-family homes. Even more startling is the data offered by the United States Department of Education (1998) which states that two-thirds of all African-American youth live in single-family households. In terms of academic achievement, by the end of fourth grade, poor, minority students are two years behind their wealthier, predominantly white peers in reading and math. By eighth grade, they are three years behind, and by 12th grade, four years behind (Levine, 2005). Herrera (2004) states, "If caring adults and role models are available to young people, they will be far more likely to develop into healthy, successful adults."

To address these problems, we have developed a P-20 service leadership program that introduces the field of education and educational leadership to groups of college students while addressing the academic and social needs of at-risk K-12 students. *CAMP Gator (Collegiate Achievement Mentoring Program)* at the University of Florida has selected collegiate student-leaders and student-athletes from a variety of academic majors and gives them the opportunity to partake in comprehensive educational leadership training. In addition, these student-athletes serve as leadership mentors to diverse middle-school students at the K-12 University Research and Development School. Therefore, these student leaders have been given the opportunity to enhance their leadership skills, mentor a child in these same leadership skills, make a difference in their community and understand the influence one can have in the field of education and educational leadership. Initial data from the pilot program, which began in the spring semester of 2008, has resulted in improved grade point averages (13%) and decreased suspensions (72%) for mentees as well as increased public speaking abilities, goal setting, and leadership development of the collegiate-student mentors.

Rationale

Mentoring works. Grossman, Tierney, and Resch (2000) attest that of those students involved in a mentoring program, school attendance increased along with an increase in grade point average. Furthermore, these students were one-third less likely to participate in violent activities. More specifically, amongst the students of color who were being mentored, there was a 70% decrease in the likelihood of drug use in comparison to their non-mentored counterparts.

Another surprising outcome that was exhibited by the mentees was an improvement in the social relationships with peers as well as with their parents.

Supporting this notion of mentoring leading to an improvement in social skills is the study done by Herrera (2000), which details how mentoring can have a positive effect on peer relationships, social skills, and classroom behavior. Barton-Arwood, et al (2000), show the impact mentoring can have upon a child's development of emotional supports and friendships. In *Mentoring with Elementary Age Students* (2000), the researchers detail how being involved in a mentoring relationship can lead to an increased awareness of social norms and an improved social network.

Along with academic and social skills, mentoring has also been proven to have an impact on the career and academic aspirations of the mentee (U.S.D.O.E., 2002; mentoring.org; Rumberger & Brenner, 2002). Mentoring can benefit children in their ability to set career goals and start taking the necessary steps to realize them. Also, mentors who are in college or have a degree allow students to see the importance of education, and more specifically, higher education. Thus, this may explain the fact that mentored students have a better chance to attend higher education (mentoring.org). In *Can Mentoring Improve Academic Achievement?* (2002), the authors conclude that students who were less academically successful, more prone to previous behavior problems, and those with less family support gained the most from their mentoring program.

The research that has proven to be the most encouraging is that which documents the mutual outcomes mentoring programs can have on both the mentors and mentees. In *Mentoring with Elementary-Age Students* (2000), the researchers discovered that improvements in self-esteem and confidence were experienced by the child and adult involved in the mentoring relationship. It is this lack of confidence and the belief that one can succeed that so often leads to failure for both students in high-poverty schools as well as collegiate athletes (Short, 2002; Tatum, 1997; Almond, Carodine, & Gratto. 2001). We foresee this program and the relationships fostered between mentor and mentee having an impact in their level of self-esteem and confidence.

The other findings concerning the mutually beneficial aspects of mentoring include more broad results. The conclusions offered in the articles *Mentoring and Relational Mutuality* (2002) and *Mentoring for Success* (2000) state that mentoring programs benefit all those involved by creating a relationship where both the mentor and the mentee experience feelings of friendship, nurturance, open-mindedness and trust. These experiences are often lacking in

the lives of student-athletes and children in high-poverty schools (Darling-Hammond & Bransford, 2005; Almond, Carodine, & Gratto. 2001).

The Program

C.A.M.P. Gator is composed of two main components: Leadership Training and Mentoring. By offering the program as a weekly academic course that incorporates service and real-world learning, we have attracted a large number of University of Florida students. Students enrolled in this course receive three credits per semester and have the opportunity to enroll for two straight semesters, thus increasing the effectiveness of the mentoring relationship (Mentoring.org). The collegiate students are chosen by the University Athletic Association and the Department of Educational Administration and Policy based upon their academic and leadership success and those who demonstrate a commitment to service-learning as demonstrated in enrollment interview. At the K-12 level, the classroom teachers and the school administration select students whom they feel could benefit from the mentoring process as research has shown that choice instead of random selection increase the chances of mentoring benefits (Brenner, M. & Rumberger, R., 2002). Students who are under-achieving academically and those who are having social issues including misbehavior and isolation are targeted for participation.

Before the mentoring process can begin, a comprehensive training program for our mentors is implemented (Brenner, M. & Rumberger, R. 2002; California D.O.E., 2002; Herrera, 2004, Grossmann, 2000; Mentor Consulting Group, 2003). We devote the first three sessions of the program solely to training and the professional development of our mentors. This training calls upon various professionals including experts in the field of literacy, special education, public speaking and bilingual education to better prepare them to meet the challenges that may arise throughout the mentoring process (California D.O.E., 2002; Mentoring Consulting Group, 2003).

Along with mentoring training, the collegiate students partake in comprehensive leadership training. The foundations of this leadership curriculum include the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* by Steven Covey, *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, and *Leading Change* by John Kotter. In addition, to enrich the leadership training, we included a variety of guest speakers from the academic and business worlds to address topics such as public speaking ability, the power of having a vision for one's future, the traits of effective leadership, and personal financial success.

The second component of the CAMP Gator program is leadership mentoring. The 90-minute mentoring sessions take place each week during the sixteen week semester. The activities are intended to go beyond merely talking and sharing but instead focus on a comprehensive leadership curriculum and engaged activities. For the pilot program, the collegiate student complemented this leadership training by teaching the K-12 students the *7 Habits of Highly Effective Teens* by Sean Covey. During this portion of the training, mentor and mentee complete their mission statements together, partake in group role-playing activities, and develop their collective leadership development plans.

Along with weekly mentoring sessions, we also wanted to introduce college life to the at-risk middle school students. Our goal was to demonstrate to them that higher education was attainable to all students if they believed in their own ability and worked hard to get there. Mentees attended campus sporting events, had meals with their mentors, and even went to classes on campus, all in an effort to introduce higher education to these at-risk children.

Findings

The pilot program for C.A.M.P. Gator has been quite successful based on the following outcomes. First, we hoped to introduce the field of education and educational leadership to students from majors other than education and from underrepresented student groups. Among our participants there was much diversity in terms of academic majors, backgrounds, race, gender, and extra-curricular activities. After completing the program, some mentors enrolled in the Graduate School of Education, others were selected by Teach for America, and others volunteered as mentors long after the school year.

Next, we envisioned a P-20 service leadership partnership where the university, community, and public schools could work together to meet the needs of all children, especially those in need of support. We succeeded in serving as a model of collaboration in that the university students received comprehensive leadership training and College of Education credit while serving in the community. The final product developed by mentor and mentee was a service project within the K-12 school allowing the other students and community as a whole to witness how change can happen when people work together.

Finally, we hoped to make a difference in the lives of all the students involved. Many of the collegiate mentors, especially the student-athletes, had never considered themselves to be leaders in the community or able to have a

wide-ranging impact off the playing field. Others were hesitant public speakers or unsure of their future goals or plans after college. Yet, their exit interviews demonstrated increased confidence in public speaking, in the abilities as leaders, and a belief in the own future successes. All university students stated that they would strongly recommend this program and 30% stated that this was their most rewarding experience at the University of Florida

The K-12 students also exhibited success from their leadership training and mentoring relationships at the conclusion of the first semester enrolled in the program. Student quantitative data revealed some amazing and almost instantaneous improvements. Of the student mentees (9 week grading period):

- 11% increase in attendance
- 18% increase in grade point average
- 72% decrease in suspensions.

In addition, the qualitative data revealed gains expressed by not only parents but also the teachers of the mentees. All parents surveyed recommended the program; one even going so far as to say that one of events was the “best day of her child’s life.” In addition, teachers expressed the following sentiments:

- *She has a much better attitude in class.*
- *She has been acting much happier and her energy level seems higher as well.*
- *He is starting to develop better work habits*
- *She is starting to realize the importance of school responsibilities.*
- *He’s shown much more confidence. He was getting lost but this program got him connected to something.*

Conclusions

This pilot program may have a profound impact on how we introduce the field of educational leadership and service earning to our collegiate students. Student-athletes and collegiate students in the field of law, medicine, business, and sports management rarely get the opportunity to experience the power and importance of making a difference in schools and the community as a whole. By developing a program that meets their needs, we envision an expansion to more schools, and thus, more students within the University and at the K-12 level.

In addition, we hope that this program will serve as a model of collaboration among P-20 stakeholders. By developing initiatives that benefit students at all levels from a variety of backgrounds, we hope to serve as a model to other higher-education institutions that are searching for ways to forge

service-learning partnerships between their public schools, school athletic programs, and colleges of education in a manner that is mutually beneficial. With continued data collection, expansion, and enhancement of the leadership training and mentoring curriculum, we envision CAMP Gator to become an exemplar of the ways in which educational leadership can enhance academic excellence, student efficacy and equity in a P-20 setting.

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