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

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Dreamfar High School Marathon (DHSM)

- Permission to use real name, Trinity IRB approval
- Founded 2008, New England’s first High School marathon training program
- 501(c)3 Nonprofit Organization in 6 MA schools

“DHSM turns the road into the classroom. We challenge high school students to reach their full potential in and out of school by demonstrating how dreams can be realized through hard work.”

– Excerpt from Dreamfar’s Mission Statement
How can nonprofit organizations impact students’ experiences in school both academically and socially?

◦ What are some of the strategies Dreamfar uses to positively affect its students?

◦ How do DHSM students perceive Dreamfar’s impact on them?
Significance

- Student’s experiences *in* school, shaped by what they do *out* of school

- Time devoted after school; teaches dedication and commitment

- Learning is not one dimensional
Literature Review

- Physical Activity (P.A.) promotes positive youth development
  - “Playworks” – Madsen et al. (2011)

- After school programs help academically and socially
  - Student perceptions – Ebie (2005)
Research has been done on P.A., after school programs and nonprofits
  ◦ This research combines these 3 dimensions

Other research focuses on sports teams, art programs, clubs

Dreamfar is a unique program; 1st established in New England
Methods

- **Quantitative**
  - Surveyed Dreamfar’s current students – 75 total
  - 67 surveys back, response rate = 89.3%
  - 5 pt Likert scale: strongly agree (5) → strongly disagree (1)
  - Identities kept anonymous

- **Qualitative**
  - 8 individual structured interviews – recorded and transcribed (identities kept confidential)
    - President, Mentor Coordinator, Current Coach, Board Member, Former Coach and 3 student alumni
Dreamfar positively influences student’s social experiences in school by using strategies that concentrate on building self-esteem through goal setting, developing student-adult relationships and breaking social cliques. Dreamfar students perceive both academic and social benefits, but feel more strongly about social benefits.
“The Impossible is Possible”

- Setting goals → Achievement → Confidence

  - “[We] show them they can do something they never thought possible… just to give them a goal and that goals are good to have... and show them that impossible is possible.” (Mentor Coordinator)

  - “For me, Dreamfar is about setting a goal and delivering on that goal and I think some people can only be so smart and can only be good at some things, but anyone can move 26 miles if you set your mind to it and when you do, the result can be pretty amazing. You can believe in yourself.” (Former Coach)
73.1% agreed that they set goals for themselves since joining Dreamfar ($M = 4.22$)

68.7% agreed that they have more confidence in social situations ($M = 4.06$)

- “It’s awesome, it’s just flat out awesome. It’s really cool. It’s awesome to feel like you’re doing something that is that amazing.” (Female Alumnus)
“I saw them as people”

- Building student–adult relationships, through mentoring and weekly team gatherings
  - “I think kids at certain ages think adults are the enemy... And in this case [Dreamfar is] showing how you can create relationships with people that are older than them, that are meaningful and help support their growth. And I think they then see the community of older people differently.” (Board Member)
  - “They learn how to interact socially with adults which can be hard and I think one thing that is really beneficial is that it gives students a chance to see the teachers that are in the program... as human beings.” (Coach/Teacher)
57% agreed that they have better relationships with adults ($M = 3.93$)

- “It made me more comfortable with adults… I saw them as people.” (Male alumnus)

- “I had one mentor and she was the best… I basically told her my life story and she helped me through a lot of things that I had been going through that year.” (Male alumnus)

- “It improved my relationship with teachers because they were interested in what I was doing.” (Female alumnus)
“A Common Purpose”

- Dreamfar breaks down social cliques by emphasizing the team
  - “I saw students who were completely withdrawn come out of their shells and make social contacts and relationships that they never would have before. And they were more open-minded to different peer groups.” (Coach)
  - “The reality is I think people have a lot more commonalities than they think but they judge people how they look or who they hang out with... it brings people together that would not have necessarily come together, with a common purpose, which I think helps too, because... you are all actually trying to get something done.” (President)
Student Perception

- 77.6% agreed that they met friends they not have otherwise

  - “I made a lot of friends through Dreamfar... at the time I was feeling kind of disconnected from the community so it really helped me meet a good group of kids.” (Male alumnus)

  - “Everyone is so different; it attracts all different kind of people” (Female alumnus)
Different kinds of students

Race/Ethnicity make up
- White
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic
- Other

Grade Level
- 9th Grade
- 10th Grade
- 11th Grade
- 12th Grade
“Stick to a plan”

- Use social strategies and apply these to school
  - “If they stick to a plan with a marathon they could take that same tool and use it academically.” (Coach)
  - “If that [a marathon] drives your confidence in your ability to do something, then things that were scary like science may be less scary if you have higher belief if what you’re capable of.” (Mentor Coordinator)
  - “I saw kids doing better in school, coming to school more often because they wanted to be part of the team, they wanted to run.” (Former Coach)
62.7% feel more connected to their school ($M = 3.9$)

- “I definitely picked up grades, started paying attention more.” (Male Alumnus)

- “It definitely shaped all of high school.” (Female Alumnus)

- “It gave me something other than school to look forward to. I had done really badly in school my first couple of years, but when I started doing Dreamfar, after practice I had a reason to go do my homework... cause I wasn’t enjoying school, but it was something I had to do if I wanted to keep participating in Dreamfar.” (Male Alumnus)
Conclusion

- Dreamfar strives to enhance student’s experiences in school
- They do this by teaching students how to set goals, how to form relationships with adults and by expanding their social network
- Dreamfar students perceive these social benefits
Future Research

- Survey the students again and see if their perceptions have changed
- Still early in the year; Marathon is in May
- Returning students report higher means
  - First time ($M = 3.59$) vs. Returner ($M = 4.2$)

- Look at academic performance indicators, such as GPA, test scores, etc.
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