

Chapter 15

Benefits of Athletics for Military School Students: The Perceived Benefits of Interscholastic and Intramural Athletics for Students of Military Schools

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ABSTRACT

This chapter studies the perception of cadets, alumni, and staff of military schools and colleges (N=220) who responded to a survey about the benefits of interscholastic and intramural athletics for students in military schools and colleges. Overwhelmingly, respondents agreed that both athletics build citizens with good character, foster leadership development, improve academic success metrics and overall personal wellness. Respondents surprisingly perceived athletics as slightly less impactful on fostering integrity and respect as well as on dropout prevention and furthering writing skills. Respondents perceive that interscholastic athletics were more likely to deliver positive returns than intramural athletics, even though most military schools and colleges require participation in intramural athletics, and participation in interscholastic athletics is often optional and based on ability level. Overall, there is a strong perception that participation in athletic activities of any kind offer positive returns for cadets attending military schools and colleges.

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INTRODUCTION

Athletics have become a staple in the educational environment for most secondary schools and colleges, both in the United States and abroad. One not-so-common characterization of military schools and colleges is that they combine the best of two rival Greek city-states – Athens and Sparta. Whereas the democratic city-state of Athens emphasized extensive study of the arts, literature, and philosophy, the oligarchic Sparta city-state emphasized physical fitness. Retired Coast Guard Rear Admiral Scott Burhoe, the 10th President of Fork Union Military Academy in Fork Union, VA, and the 39th Superintendent of the United States Coast Guard Academy (who also wrote a Foreword to this Handbook), articulates a thesis that military schools and colleges “blend the best of Athens and Sparta. They focus on intellectual growth, physical fitness, and character development...interconnecting those three like strands of triple braided line; each strand adding strength to the whole. Anyone who properly develops and balances mind, body, and spirit will be a success story (Burhoe, 2019).” While the purpose of this chapter is not to expound upon the Athenian academic, leadership, or character development components of military schools explicitly, it is intended to help the reader make a connection between those elements and the pillar of physical fitness emphasized in the Spartan city-state. Today, sports and physical activity are viewed by most people as part of a well-rounded educational experience for adolescents and young adults, along with core academics, the arts, and various co- and extra-curricular activities. The present study attempted to examine the extent to which cadets and others at military schools and colleges felt that participation in interscholastic and/or intramural athletic activities was of benefit to cadets in the broader “parallel” domains of academics, leadership, citizenship/character development, and personal wellness.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Since most military schools and colleges have four “pillars” upon which their educational philosophies are rooted, those four pillars were the basis for creation of the survey instrument used in the present study. In a parallel way, the literature reviewed for the study was, not surprisingly, found to encompass those four major pillars/themes: academics, leadership, citizenship, and athletics/wellness.

Athletics and Academics

A number of studies reveal strong connections between athletics participation and academic success. Rodriguez et al. (2020) reviewed 22 articles on the relationships between physical activity, physical fitness, and academic achievement, and found that in slightly more than 80% of those studies, the correlations between physical activity and academic achievement or physical fitness and academic achievement were strong. Fox et al. (2010) found that “for high school girls, both physical activity and sports team participation were each independently associated with a higher GPA. For high school boys, only sports team participation was independently associated with a higher GPA. For middle school students, the positive association between physical activity and GPA could not be separated from the relationship between sports team participation and a higher GPA” (page 31). Specifically, the Fox study found the following relationships to academic achievement when adjusting for both SES and race/ethnicity: in high school girls, hours of moderate/vigorous physical activity ($t = 4.54$; $p < 0.001$) and participation in sports teams ($t = 5.99$; $p < 0.001$) were independently associated with higher academic achievement.

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