

LOOKING BACK: REFLECTIONS FROM PLAY IT SMART GRADUATES

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Abstract: The Play It Smart Program has an academic focus, an athletic audience, and an impact that spans well beyond the classroom and the athletic field. This study examined the reflections of Play It Smart graduates on how the program has affected their lives academically, athletically, and socially. Qualitative data were collected from 1,361 student-athletes who graduated from Play It Smart programs in the years 2003-2005. Responses revealed two major themes: student-athlete outcomes and social influences. Student-athlete outcomes consisted of three sub-themes: (a) developing important life skills; (b) accomplishing new heights athletically, academically, and socially; and (c) learning life lessons from participation in community service. Social influences consisted of: (a) the academic coach, (b) recognition from others, and (c) team influences. Through the Play It Smart Program, student-athletes felt that they gained the life skills to stay positive and persevere through the challenges that they may face beyond high school. These life skills were learned through a positive mentoring relationship with their academic coach, whose role was to create a positive environment for self-exploration and a context for growth.

Key words: At-risk youth, Life skill development, Transferable skills.

INTRODUCTION

A key component to successful life skills programs is the inclusion of methods for assessing the effects of the program on its participants (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005). Metz (2007) highlighted this importance by identifying five reasons for conducting program evaluations: to find out what works and what does not work, to showcase the effectiveness of the program, to improve practice, to plan

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for the future, and to add knowledge to the field. These reasons go beyond advocating purely outcome-focused research demonstrating that the participants changed in a positive way, as they also encourage research to help understand the process of how positive changes occur. The aim of this study was to examine the lived experiences of a group of graduating student-athletes from the Play It Smart Program. Qualitative interviews were conducted with a large number of participants to gain a more clear understanding of the life skills they learned, and how they learned them.

Conceptual framework

The Play It Smart Program was implemented based on the delivery framework recommended by Petitpas et al. (2005) that suggests positive youth development is most likely to occur when young people: (a) are in an appropriate *context* for self-discovery (i.e., a voluntary activity that is intrinsically rewarding, contains clear rules and boundaries, and requires committed effort over time); (b) are surrounded by *external assets*, including caring adult mentors and a positive peer group; and (c) acquire *internal assets* in the form of life skills that are important for dealing with various challenges, and are given opportunities to use these skills in other settings through leadership and community service roles outside of sport.

The Play It Smart program was developed in 1998 (Play It Smart, 2008) with the goal of providing inner-city at-risk high school football players with a mentor to support them academically, athletically, and personally during their high school athletic career. The developers of the Play It Smart Program sought to take advantage of the desirable nature of sport participation by targeting interscholastic football players and emphasizing team cohesion and creating a positive context for academic and athletic achievement. Program participants received the benefit of an “academic coach” who was trained in how to build positive working relationships with students and how to assist the head coaches in creating environments that promoted positive growth. These caring adult mentors served as external assets and helped participants identify transferable skills acquired through sport and use these skills for academic preparation, building relationships, and future planning. Additionally, participants engaged in community service projects (e.g., tutoring younger students, reading to kindergarten classes, assisting the elderly, volunteering in soup kitchens) that allowed them to gain experience using their transferable skills in non-sport settings.

The key to the success of the Play It Smart Program is the academic coach, who works 20 to 25 hours per week throughout the academic year. The academic coach works with athletes from their first year until their graduation from high school.

Academic coaches assist student-athletes by helping them to identify their values, needs, interests, and skills. Once this is accomplished, specific academic, athletic, career, and community service goals are developed. Academic coaches monitor progress and provide the resources and support needed to help participants overcome any obstacles that could hinder progress toward attaining their goals. For example, the academic coach often organizes academic support services, standardized testing preparation courses, study halls, college visitations, team building, community service participation and life skill development. Individual and team incentive plans are developed and serve as rewards for hitting goal targets. Student-athletes are also supported in securing leadership roles outside of sport to help them gain confidence in their abilities to transfer athletic skills to other domains.

The success of the Play It Smart Program is evaluated on the achievement of a series of outcome measures including: (a) improvements in grade point averages, SAT/ACT test scores, and graduation rates; (b) increased involvement in community service activities; and (c) the development of the life skills and attitudes necessary to make positive choices concerning health and career enhancement. Therefore, academic coaches provide student-athletes with ongoing feedback about the specific behaviors necessary to achieve their goals and these behaviors are reinforced by the coach and team leaders.

Although the program started with only four schools in 1998, there are currently 160 high schools and over 10,000 student-athletes participating in the Play It Smart program today. Play It Smart student-athletes often experience enhanced academic and athletic performance as a result of their participation in the program and they graduate high school and enroll in college at a higher rate than their peers (Play It Smart, 2008). Although quantitative data has been helpful in understanding the influence of the program on the students' grades, standardized test scores, and graduation rates, qualitative data is needed to illustrate the impact of the program on the athlete with respect to personal outcomes achieved through participation in Play It Smart. These data also reveals students' impressions about various components of the program (e.g., the academic coach, community service) and how these components contributed to their experiences. Therefore, the aim of the study was to use qualitative measures to assess the impact of the program on graduating student-athletes.

METHOD

Design

This study was designed to examine the experiences and reflections of high school participants of the Play It Smart Program. More specifically, this study investigated the athletes' perceptions of how the Play It Smart Program and academic coaches affected the high school student-athletes. A qualitative interview design was used to gather the reflections of these graduating student-athletes at the surface level, to simplify data collection for large number of participants in the study.

Participants

Participants in the study included 1,361 Play It Smart Program student-athletes graduating in the spring of 2003, 2004, or 2005 from cities across the United States, which represents approximately 20% of the participants receiving the program at the time of the study. During this time, the Play It Smart Program expanded from 88 schools in the 2002-2003 academic year to 128 schools in the 2004-2005 year. As a result of the expansion, some of the participants may have been relatively new to the program, only having had Play It Smart at their schools for the last one or two years, while participants at other schools likely had the program for all four years of their high school career. The participants were primarily male football players; however, in the 2004-2005 academic year the Play It Smart Program expanded to other sports in a small number of schools, and at these schools there were a few females in the program. The demographic characteristics of the participants in the program remained fairly consistent from year to year. The racial make-up of the participants was 62-69% African American, 11-13% Hispanic/Latino, 12%-19% White/Caucasian, 1% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, 1% Asian, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 3-5% other. Only 41-43% of student-athletes said that they lived with both parents, and 1% to 4% had children of their own. Most participants in the program came from large families; the average participant had 3 brothers or sisters. About 13-15% of student-athletes worked part-time during high school, with more than half of those with a job working greater than 10 hours per week.

Data collection

Exit interviews were designed by the researchers to gather the Play It Smart Program student-athletes' reflections of their experiences in the program, what they

thought they gained from participation, and how they thought they would use these skills in the future. Exit interviews were completed during the final months of the school year prior to graduation. The specific questions asked varied from year to year. Example questions are “How has Play It Smart influenced you academically?”; “What do you think you learned through Play It Smart that will help you in the future?”; “What changes have your teachers or family seen in you since you started participating in Play It Smart?”; “If you participated in any community service activities, what did you do and what did you gain from the activities?” Each year no more than 4 questions were asked, and the interviews typically took no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Academic coaches were given the option to either administer the interview in a one-on-one, face-to-face interview or they could hand out the interview forms to the student-athletes for them to complete as written questionnaires. Approximately 85% of the interviews were administered using the interview form and the remaining 15% were face-to-face interviews. Student-athletes typically responded with answers that were one or two sentences in length, resulting in several thousand sentences of data. Responses to the exit interviews from the 2002-2003, 2003-2004, and 2004-2005 academic years were combined for use in this study.

Procedures and data analysis

At the end of each academic year, the researchers mailed out exit interview forms to academic coaches at all Play It Smart Programs. After the interviews were completed, academic coaches mailed the completed exit interview forms back to the researchers. The responses from the exit interviews were transcribed verbatim and organized by question using an Excel spreadsheet. Constant comparison analysis was used for interpretation of the qualitative data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys 1.5 was used to assist in the coding of each response by analyzing the semantic nature of the responses line-by-line and reporting the prevalence of key words. After the initial analysis, open and axial coding was used to organize themes and sub-themes that emerged throughout the data (Creswell, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Final connections between themes and sub-themes were analyzed using selective coding. A concept map was used at this stage to illustrate these connections (see Figure 1).

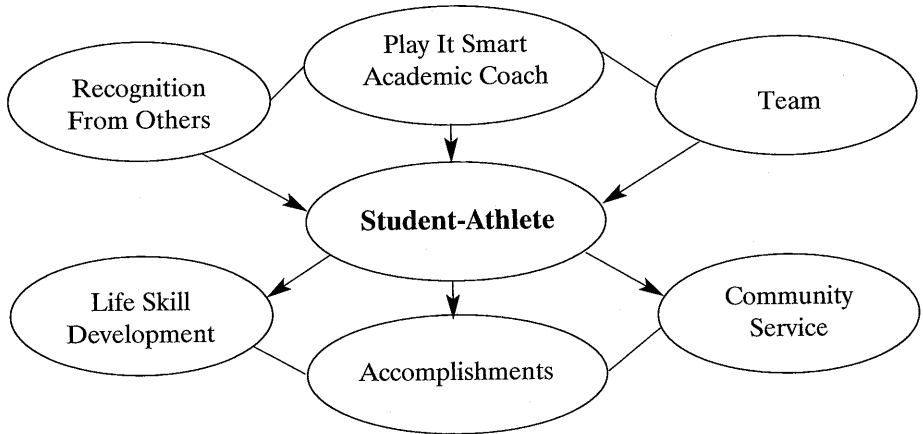


Figure 1. Concept map of themes and sub-themes from exit interviews for the Play It Smart Program.

RESULTS

Qualitative analysis of exit interview data collected over three years of the Play It Smart Program revealed two major themes: student-athlete outcomes and social influences each with three sub-themes. These results are described in the following sections.

Student-athlete outcomes

Student-athletes recognized that their participation in the Play It Smart Program was influential in helping them to reach their goals. Specifically, exiting student-athletes felt that they (a) developed important life skills, (b) accomplished new heights athletically, academically, and socially, and (c) learned life lessons from participation in community service.

Life skills development. Student-athletes reported that they learned work skills, teamwork skills, and perseverance that helped them feel better prepared for the future. Participants responded that the Play It Smart Program helped them develop a good work ethic, kept them focused on academic and athletic tasks, and reinforced working hard to achieve goals. One student reported that "Play It Smart taught me that if you want to get somewhere in life, you have to work for it. You have to be consistent in your work habits. Hard work will get you where you want to be."

Participants felt better prepared to work as a team or in the community because of the cooperation and communication skills promoted by their Play It Smart experiences. One dedicated team member said, "I am a team player because of Play It Smart. We had to depend on our teammates to see us through. I learned that I can depend on others and being a team player allowed us to do better."

In addition, participants reported the importance of persevering through future challenges, despite the risks and possible failures that occur en route to reaching their goals. For example, one athlete realized that "Hard work does pay off. I didn't believe it at first. No matter what, I can succeed. Play It Smart taught me that I could be a better person and when challenges come my way I can step up to them." Working hard to accomplish goals, teamwork skills, and persevering through adversity are skills these student-athletes learned through Play It Smart Program that will benefit them far beyond high school.

Accomplishments. By applying the life skills participants learned they were able to make strides academically, athletically, and personally. Students in the program reported that they developed a more conscientious work ethic and diligent study skills, which resulted in elevated grade point averages. One student-athlete reflected on his academic progress saying, "I didn't know how to study on my own or even what to look for. Play It Smart helped me learn to find the root of the questions and how to get the answer". Student-athletes felt more confident in their athletic abilities because of their academic preparation off the field. One participant said, "I had no worries on the field about school work, so I was comfortable while on the field. This made me more relaxed and allowed me to play better". Participants reported that they became more responsible and had better leadership skills, thus feeling more comfortable emerging as a leader in cooperative settings on and off the field. One student-athlete said "The Play It Smart Program taught me leadership, teamwork, and the importance of giving back; overall made me a better person" and another said "It has taught me to build professional relationships and overall people skills". For one participant, the Play It Smart Program even helped them in "going from a quiet person to a social person". Social skills were not limited to scholastic leadership, because some student-athletes also found their niche serving the community.

Community service. Giving back to the community provided an opportunity for participants to hone and practice their life skills beyond an academic or athletic setting. One student-athlete described his community service experiences as "read to elementary kids, Special Olympics, taught sports clinics – I learned communication skills, how to work with kids, and how to teach". Additionally, student-athletes participating in community service recognized the diversity within their communities,

the importance and benefits of helping the community, and the good feelings that come from giving back without compensation. One student-athlete reported, "I learned that working with people is rewarding and that giving back to the community will benefit you in life. It made me feel good to give back." Through community service opportunities, student-athletes learned to lend a hand to those in need and recognized the value of working with people of all ages. One student-athlete said about his experience that he "helped collect canned goods to give to people who did not have a home. I saw people who were dirty and hungry and learned that everyone does not live like me. I enjoyed helping them out. They smiled". Student-athletes working with children found that it was fun to positively influence kids as a role model. One community service participant realized it was important to mentor children when he said, "I saw a lot of kids who have no one to turn to and I tried to encourage them to keep up their dreams". Participants felt that serving the community helped them to develop a greater respect for all people and that it feels good to help out by providing service to others.

Life skill development, personal achievement, and realizing the benefits of community service contributed to increasing student-athletes' self-confidence and strengthened their identity as a model student-athlete. One student-athlete explained, "In order to play football, you need the grade first, and the program taught me to work hard and play hard, but in that order". After all, "Education is key, and in life after sports there will always be education to fall back on. Therefore, I was taught to be an all-star on and off the field". Student-athletes gained confidence in their possibilities for the future. One future scholar said, "It gave me the confidence to go on to the next level of education", and another remarked, "Play It Smart contributed to how comfortable I am going into the world".

Social influences

Different social influences comprised the support network that contributed to the positive outcomes highlighted in the previous section. The following section addresses: (a) academic coach, (b) recognition from others, and (c) team influences.

Academic coach. Academic coaches work with students on an individual level to help them reach their own potential. Student-athletes felt not only supported by their academic coaches, but also pushed and challenged by them. Academic coaches encourage students much like a "friend", push them to succeed as would a "parent", and show a great concern for their well-being as a "caretaker" would. One student-athlete said, "He [the academic coach] has changed me by encouraging me to get better grades. He taught us not only about academics, but also about life itself.

He was like a friend to us. I miss him.” Another participant said, “My grades have improved because I was pushed by my academic coach to work hard. They reinforced what my parents always told me about school.” One student acknowledged how much his academic coach looked out for him when he said:

My grades are at a high A/B range. I know I have someone to talk to. One day I lost my gloves and she went out and got a new pair for the game. She took a lot of time out of her life to help us be the best we can be.

Academic coaches teach many life lessons, both on and off the playing field; one student-athlete said:

Athletically, my academic coach has made me work out constantly, also letting me know what I had to do to get better; academically, staying on me, not letting me get the chance to mess up; socially, just taking the time to ask me how I was doing.

Academic coaches also guided students through college application processes and provided them with genuine support; in some cases, it was this positive relationship with the academic coach that kept participants from dropping out of school and instead, they kept the college dream alive. One participant expressed this impact when he said, “He kept me in school. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be on my way to college.”

With confidence and determination, student-athletes in the Play It Smart Program leave high school with the necessary tools to be successful in college, the work force, and beyond. Student-athletes are encouraged by academic coaches to contemplate their future plans and to be proactive in planning for their life after high school (college, job, etc.). As high school graduating students, adolescents face significant decisions, and participants recognized that there is more to life than their dreams of playing professional football. One student-athlete said that his academic coach:

Has taken me on the side to really focus on my future regarding athletics and academics; it has helped me consider what I may do in my future and has allowed me to feel very involved in every aspect of my schooling, including grades, sports, and activities.

These important decisions shape the future for these individuals, and with the help and guidance of the academic coaches, student-athletes can find a path that

makes sense for them as they work diligently towards their future goals, overcoming obstacles along the way.

Recognition from others. The accomplishments of participants in the Play It Smart Program did not go undetected; in fact, many people close to them noticed these changes, and positively reinforced the student-athletes. Participants reported that others noticed the increase in their grades, motivations to attend college, and overall self-satisfaction. One student said, "I think they've noticed that I've become more focused and a better all-around student-athlete." Their teachers and families were happy to see attitudes change for the better, with a more positive outlook on life, including academic, not just athletic, aspirations. One football player mentioned that his family and friends noticed that, "I do care about school. I actually do my work now and I bring my grades home. At first I didn't. All I talk about now is going to college". From the outside looking in, friends and family recognized that student-athletes in the Play It Smart program became better communicators and exhibited more mature and responsible behaviors than before their experiences with the program. One student said, "They've seen a different version of me. They've seen me mature and become focused on my goals. They've also seen me determined not to give up."

Team influences. The whole team atmosphere is altered once an academic coach enters the scene at a school and student-athletes truly begin working together in a positive and productive way to achieve mutual goals. With a caring adult who supports, assists, and genuinely cares about the well-being of the student-athletes, football teams with the Play It Smart Program found that they became more tight-knit, much like a "family". One athlete reported that:

I truly believe that Play it Smart was a major reason for the success our team had this season. We were able to become a much closer group through the time we spent together during Play It Smart. Our team developed trust in each other and nobody was an outsider in the group. We developed love much like a family and it showed on the field.

The influence of enhanced team cohesion was reflected in off-the-field endeavors as well, as one student said, "I believe Play It Smart brought the football team together not just on the athletic field, but on the academic level as well. Everyone strived to make each other better academically." Student-athletes realized that they shared similar goals and aspirations as their peers, and thus worked together on common ground "to work harder for each other". The positive atmosphere that was enhanced by the Play It Smart Program helped participants learn and grow among

friends. Participants reported confidence gains in the classroom, on the field, and out in the world.

DISCUSSION

There are many opportunities to influence youth at the high school level, and clearly the Play It Smart Program has made a positive impact. Exit interview responses from graduating student-athletes demonstrated that they recognized the contributions of the Play It Smart Program in helping them to become better students, athletes, and citizens. The central themes identified through these exit interviews are consistent with the general (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002) and sport specific (Petitpas et al., 2005) conceptualizations of the necessary components of effective positive youth development initiatives. Specifically, structured sport experiences can provide a solid context for growth when participants also have the benefit of caring adult mentors who challenge and support them throughout their high school years (Gould & Carson, 2008). When both the context and external assets are in place, young people are in the best situation to acquire the internal assets that prepare them for successful futures. Having a mentor to challenge and support student-athletes throughout their high school years was shown to have an empowering influence over students in the Play It Smart Program, launching them toward a successful future.

The academic coach plays a very important role in the development of the student-athlete. The academic coach supports the athlete, pushes the athlete to work to his/her potential, and acts as a positive role model. Student-athletes reported that the life skills and confidence they gained stemmed from the positive influence and support of the academic coach. Having a mentor invested in the future of these student-athletes had an effect on other social relationships as well. The presence of the academic coach enhanced the team climate, bringing the team together as a more cohesive group. Athletes felt more united as they now shared common goals on and off the field. As a result of positive mentoring and increased team cohesion, student-athletes noticed personal transformations taking place. Many experienced a new appreciation for their education, and they began to extend themselves to others socially and in the community. These acts caused them to receive positive attention and reinforcing feedback from others (school officials, parents, peers, coaches, etc.). The positive influence of the academic coach, increased teamwork and peer support, and reinforcing feedback from others provided an ideal environment for the graduates to thrive, leading them to achieve the outcomes evident in the study.

Graduates of the Play It Smart Program reported the acquisition of important life skills as a result of their participation in the program. Students learned to work hard, work cooperatively with others, and persevere despite adversity. These skills can be transferred to future careers, family life, and relationships within their community. Student-athletes were also able to recognize and articulate the accomplishments that they experienced personally, socially, and athletically. The pursuit and achievement of their goals on and off the field were critical steps in preparing the student-athletes for a college education or selected career path.

Participants in the program were exposed to a wide range of opportunities to apply their skills by interacting with people in the community and making a difference in the lives of others. This experience helped students to step outside of themselves and acknowledge the importance of serving others. The community outreach, feelings of success, and life skills learned through participation in the program contributed to a heightened self-confidence for many graduates of the Play It Smart Program.

The present study added depth to the understanding of how the Play It Smart Program affects its participants. Annual data collected on the outcome of the program focused primarily on quantitative measures of academic success, such as GPA, graduation rates, and performance on standardized academic tests (Play It Smart, 2008). The qualitative data in the present study provided an understanding from the participants' point of view of a more complex set of outcomes, such as the life skills that were learned (e.g., teamwork, perseverance), as well as important characteristics of the key component of the program, the academic coach.

Another sport-based life skills program, based on the same principles as the Play It Smart Program (Petitpas et al., 2005), also incorporated qualitative data collection in the evaluation of their program. Participants in The First Tee (The First Tee, 2007), also a multi-site youth development program, work with trained mentors to learn life skills through sport. Third-party research reported that participants in The First Tee learned a variety of life skills, including perseverance, appreciating diversity, and goal setting (The First Tee, 2007). These findings are quite similar to those of the present study, even though the programs are quite different in nature, which demonstrates the diverse ways in which programs can be implemented to obtain similar goals.

Collecting and analyzing qualitative data, specifically exit interviews, to obtain information about program success and the processes leading to positive outcomes was a challenging and rewarding experience. Several researchers have advocated for increased use of qualitative and mixed methods for conducting program evaluation (Dick, 1997; LeCompte, 1994; Rao & Woolcock, 2004). The exit interview process

described in this study applied qualitative data collection procedures and analyses that provided valuable insight for program planning and demonstrated program success in ways that quantitative data alone (e.g., increased GPA) could not. Rich stories in the student-athletes' own words provided compelling information about how the program and the academic coach affected the lives of the participants.

Exit interviews do have several limitations, however (Sewell, n.d.; Young & Hagerty, 2007). Data gathered through this method can be biased in several ways. One way is for the interviewer, in this case the academic coach, to consciously or unconsciously solicit information in such a way that only positive answers are given to questions. Another way the information can be biased is that respondents may be hesitant to report negative findings or outcomes to the academic coach, because they do not want to disappoint their mentor, they do not want to report negative aspects of the program, or other reasons. The respondents also may simply not answer truthfully. A third way the information could be distorted is during the analysis phase – the researcher may not be totally objective in the coding of statements and the organization of themes and sub-themes. The researcher used the text analysis software to determine the words and phrases that emerged most frequently from the data, which established a more systematic and objective system of coding. The use of the SPSS text analysis software may have helped to overcome some of these analytical limitations. The principal coder was a researcher for the Play It Smart Program, and although not involved with the program directly, it must be acknowledged that the responses probably reflect an overly optimistic view of the program. Engaging another researcher in the data analysis phase may have helped to balance any research biases that may have been present. It must also be emphasized that the results from exit interviews are still self-report assessments, and may not be an accurate reflection of actual behavior change.

Exit interviews do offer some distinct advantages over survey and traditional quantitative methods (Sewell, n.d.; Young & Hagerty, 2007). Participants are able to explain the program and their experiences in their own words, and not be constrained by language in surveys and standardized assessments. This was particularly valuable for this sample of high school students, as being able to express themselves in their own language provided richness not possible through other methods. This type of data also has high face validity, and the responses are directly linked to the participants' experiences. Even considering the possible optimistic bias in the responses, the specific themes that emerged were reflective of the dimensions underlying this optimistic outlook, and offer a different way of examining the Play It Smart Program's outcomes and processes. This information, coupled with more quantitative data about program success (e.g., GPA, graduation rates), gives a more

comprehensive view of how the program affects its participants than the quantitative data alone.

The exit interview process not only gave the researchers the opportunity to gather information from participants, it also gave the academic coaches an opportunity to sit down with their student-athletes and reflect on what was learned, get feedback about specific aspects of the program, and possibly do some planning for the participants' future after high school. This chance for academic coaches to have a final opportunity to meet with their student-athletes, possibly say "good-bye", or at least acknowledge that their relationship will be changing after graduation, provided a valuable closing experience for both academic coaches and participants. The value of an exit interview may go beyond data collection and program evaluation, and could be incorporated as an important program component for addressing the transition to life after high school graduation.

The present study examined the positive youth development that is evident through the stories of graduates of the Play It Smart Program. Parallel to the model established by Petitpas et al. (2005), the external assets of the Play It Smart Program (primarily the academic coach) helped to create the appropriate context for student-athletes to acquire internal assets (transferrable life skills) that will help them in their future endeavors outside of sport. The reflections of these graduates illustrate the impact that the Play It Smart Program has had on its participants.

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