The significance of sport extends far beyond the field of play. The LA84 Foundation, as part of its mission, examines the role of sport in society. The 2012 LA84 Foundation Summit was a national conference devoted to the in-depth exploration of the relationship between youth sports participation and academic outcomes.

The Foundation's interest in the topic goes back several years to a series of focus groups we conducted with Los Angeles high school students to learn what they thought about sports. One question we asked was why some students choose not to take part in athletics. We were surprised by one recurring response, namely that some students and their parents believe that sports detract from academic success. That answer was contrary to our own observations and our understanding of the research. So, in 2008, the Foundation commissioned a review of research on high school sports and academics. That review confirmed that scholars consistently have found a consistent positive correlation between involvement in sports and academic achievement. The literature also indicates that the relationship is complicated and that we do not fully understand why the correlation exists.

The 2012 Summit closely examined that connection. Sports leaders, education experts, scholars and athletes met to discuss the latest research, their personal experiences and possible new avenues of research. This report summarizes the rich discussions among the Summit speakers and participants. The report should stimulate an ongoing discussion regarding the educational benefits of youth sports. Sharing the information about those benefits with parents and education policy makers will be tremendously important as our nation struggles with a myriad of problems caused of low graduation rates in too many of our nation's high schools. While no one suggests that sports are a magic bullet, the message of the 2012 Summit is clear. Youth sports programs, when properly designed and managed, can play an important role in helping young people achieve academic success.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to our lead Summit sponsor Samsung and to Dow our Roundtable member, as well as to our strategic partners the United States Olympic Committee and the United Way Worldwide.

Anita L. DeFrantz
President, LA84 Foundation
The 2012 LA84 Foundation Summit took place on November 8 in Los Angeles. The Summit addressed the relationship between youth sports participation and academic achievement. It was a national conference of more than eighty sport administrators, journalists, scholars, policy experts, athletes and business leaders. The agenda included six sessions.

### 2012 SUMMIT AGENDA

**Keynote Address**  
*Pat Haden, Athletic Director, U of Southern California*

**Sports & Academic Achievement: State of Knowledge**  
*Don Sabo, D’Youville College, Center for Research on Physical Activity, Sport & Health*

**Graduation Rates: What Is at Stake?**  
**Panel:**  
- Mary Bruce, Civic Enterprises.  
- Russell Rumberger, U of California, Santa Barbara  
**Moderator:** Claudio Sanchez, National Public Radio

**The Power of Sport: Personal Perspectives**  
**Panel:**  
- Mayra Escobar, Kids In Sports alumna, Maria Cruz Garcia, Olympian, Short Track Speed Skating  
- Abel Navar, Students Run LA alumnus, SRLA Coordinator  
**Moderator:** Tony Brown, Heart of Los Angeles

**Chasing Causation: Proving Sport Matters**  
**Panel:**  
- Douglas Hartmann, U of Minnesota  
- Michael Massoglia, U of Wisconsin  
- Matthew Pontifex, Michigan State U  
**Moderator:** Caitlin Morris, Nike Access to Sport

**Making the Case for Youth Sports: Public Advocacy**  
**Panel:**  
- Megan Bartlett, Up2US Center for Sports-Based Youth Development  
- Wendy Hilliard, GoGirlGO! New York, Women’s Sports Foundation  
- Sally Johnson, National Council of Youth Sports  
**Moderator:** Kenneth Shropshire, Wharton School, U of Pennsylvania
There is a strong, well-documented correlation between youth sports participation and academic success as well as success in other walks of life. The positive relationship between sport and successful academic performance does not hold for all young athletes or apply equally in all settings. Youth sports program design and the social context in which programs operate are critical factors in maximizing the positive impact of youth sports. More research is needed on several fronts to understand the complex relationship between sports and academics, including the extent to which the relationship is causal.
POSITIVE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPORTS AND ACADEMICS

There was agreement among the speakers that youth sports participation, in the words of Douglas Hartmann (University of Minnesota) “is associated with lots of other things that are good … good with education, crime prevention, human development, cognitive development.”

Russell Rumberger (University of California, Santa Barbara), for example, reported that his research on school dropouts has found “strong evidence … that a variety of engagement activities including sports are one of the things that keep kids in school.”

Don Sabo (D’Youville College) developed the positive-relationship theme most completely in the opening session, “Sports & Academic Achievement: State of Knowledge.” Sabo stated that the literature establishes a “positive synergy” between sports and academic achievement in which athletes have better grades, as well as higher rates of enrollment in advanced placement courses, high school graduation and college attendance than non-athletes do.

Sabo, who began studying the impact of youth sports in the late 1980s, using large, longitudinal data sets, reported on a recent study he conducted for the United States Tennis Association. The study used a survey of 54,000 eighth- and tenth-graders, 4,278 of whom were tennis players. The results were clear-cut. The tennis players and other athletes, particularly those in non-contact sports, spent more time doing homework, were more likely to earn A’s and had higher educational aspirations, when compared to non-athletes. Although there were differences among income groups, with more affluent students having the best outcomes, the positive connection between sports participation and success in school held across every economic category.
Sports participation, Sabo continued, also is associated with positive public health and social outcomes that have an effect on educational achievement. Prompted by anecdotal accounts from coaches that sports could make a difference in teen pregnancy rates, Sabo investigated the claim, testing first in Western New York and then using a national sample. The results indicated, even after controlling for social economic status, that female athletes “had lower pregnancy rates, experienced first intercourse later in adolescence, engaged in sexual intercourse less frequently [and] reported fewer sexual partners.” Sabo concluded that youth sports is a form of social capital and a “force that creates and sustains cohesion across institutional sectors: families, teachers and community organizations.”

While most speakers approached the topic from a social science perspective, Matt Pontifex (Michigan State) took a different approach, one that examined the neurological effects of physical activity. Pontifex’s research shows that there is a positive relationship between physical activity and cognitive skills, especially self-regulatory skills that “require planning, problem solving [and] conscious choices among alternatives.” Because much of Pontifex’s work pertains to the neurological results of sustained aerobic exercise, it is important not to draw sweeping conclusions about all forms of sports activity, which involve varying dosages and durations of activity.

In the “The Power of Sport: Personal Perspectives” three athletes who participated in organized youth sports programs funded by the LA84 Foundation credited sports with making a significant difference in their lives. Maria Cruz García (U.S. Olympian), a graduate student at Columbia University, and Mayra Escobar (Kids In Sports alumna), a senior at the University of California, Irvine, described growing up in neighborhoods plagued by crime and surrounded by “at-risk” peers. García, Escobar and the third panelist, Abel Navar (Students Run LA), all cited the role other people had in introducing them to youth sports and provided similar assessments of the impact of sports. García’s mother played a key role in her daughter’s early involvement in sports, motivated by a belief that sports would keep her out of trouble and help her in school. Escobar’s best friend encouraged her to join Kids In Sports. One
of Navar’s high school friends introduced him to Students Run LA. All of the panelists credited sports with improving their self-confidence as well as their goal-setting, leadership, communications and time management skills. García recalled following a rigorous sports training and travel schedule during her teens and coming to realize that the ability to “show-up on time … discipline yourself and reach for achievement … correlates” to success in school and the workplace. Escobar explained that the goal-orientation and self-confidence she learned in sports motivated her to “start doing other things I never saw myself doing,” leading her to the yearbook staff, student council and two years as class president.

The athletes’ testimonials and Pontifex’s research underscored the multiple ways in which sport can benefit young people. They lent support to Sabo’s contention that youth sports “leaves one of the largest footprints on kids’ lives” and has a greater impact than “virtually any other extracurricular activity.”

UNEVEN RESULTS

Several speakers noted the uneven nature of research results pertaining to youth sports. Although there is substantial evidence of a positive relationship between sports and academic success, there are many exceptions to the general
pattern. The educational benefits of youth sports do not apply equally; the positive relationship does not hold in every setting. Results vary by race, gender, geographic location, sport played and income level.

A number of studies suggest that girls are more likely than boys to benefit from a positive association between sports and school. In addition, the positive association typically is less pronounced in low-income communities than in affluent ones.

Pontifex cautioned that upbeat reports about the general neurological benefits of exercise should be weighed against the harm resulting from head trauma in several sports. Claudio Sanchez (National Public Radio) and others warned that an overemphasis on sports could detract from academic success and that students, especially African-Americans students, were too often handicapped by others’ assumption that they could be successful only in athletics. These cautionary notes were another way of saying that the nature of a sports program can have a profound effect on academic outcomes.

**PROGRAM DESIGN**

The importance of sports program design arose repeatedly during the Summit. As Hartmann put it, “It is all about how programs are operationalized, the context in which they are put into place.” He argued that sports deliver the greatest benefits when they are part of a larger social system that values educational achievement, builds strong peer groups and brings parents into the process. Hartmann, like Sabo, referred to James Coleman’s classic 1961 work “The Adolescent Society” as illustrating the importance of context. Coleman “told the tale of two different high schools.” One had a great wrestling team coached by a man who was a “scholar-coach.” The team was academically accomplished and their success “cultivated an intellectual environment in the school.” However, “not far down the road were a great football team and a coach who was completely disdainful of the academic part of the school. It had an impact not just on his student athletes but on the culture of the school as a whole.”
All of the Summit speakers who represented youth sports organization echoed the importance of program design and the role of coaches.

Navar, who began running as a high school student in the Students Run LA program, noted that he had played football, tennis and volleyball in high school before running. Those previous sports experiences had relatively little impact on his life beyond the field because none of the coaches provided guidance in life skills. It was only after Navar began running that he encountered a coach who took the time to serve as a mentor, build his self-esteem and show him “how to set long-term goals, how to build on your experiences and plan for the future.” Prior to that, “there was no way of organizing my time, my energy and my focus.”

Navar now works for Students Run LA and is a high school coach. When he was asked to cite the most important thing he passes on to his students, Navar replied, “First of all, there’s a huge correlation between academics and athletic performance.” Navar impresses on his athletes that the simple credo of “trying your best” is transferable from one arena to the other.

Three youth sports administrators, Sally Johnson (National Council of Youth Sports), Wendy Hilliard (Women’s Sports Foundation) and Megan Bartlett (Up2Us), also made the point that the best youth sports programs consciously teach non-sports skills. Their organizations all reflect an approach to youth sports that is consistent with Hartmann’s and Sabo’s vision of successful sports programs operating as part of a larger, complex social fabric supporting young people. Johnson’s National Council of Youth Sports promotes sport as part of a broader effort to create “healthy lifestyles in safe environments for stronger neighborhoods and more wholesome communities.”
Bartlett explained that Up2Us sees youth sport as an important component of positive youth development. Up2Us works with sports providers and communities to design programs that help young people develop social skills, self-awareness, a sense of identity, situational or “plan B thinking,” and focus. She argued, “If you’re learning those skills in the sport context, those are the things you are going to apply to the academic world.”

Hilliard runs GoGirlGo! New York, which combines physical activities with self-esteem building and leadership training. Hilliard noted that in girls’ programs an important design element is simply providing a safe space. “The girls,” she said, “have to have their own space to feel confident … a dedicated space where nobody else is going to be kicking you out because the boys are playing basketball.”

The discussion about social skills, self-esteem, self-discipline and goal setting in National Council of Youth Sports, Up2Us and GoGirlGo! programs dovetailed with a trend noted earlier in the day by two of the education experts on the program, Rumberger and policy analyst Mary Bruce (Civic Enterprises).
Rumberger explained that there is a “real, emerging body of research [that] is getting stronger by the month” investigating “the things that matter for kids to be successful in life.” That research indicates that good test scores and grade point averages in high school are not the sole indicators of later success. Interpersonal and intra-personal skills, as well as the ability to self-regulate and work with teams also lead to adult success. Rumberger added, “I think you could make a really strong argument that athletics” develops characteristics such self-confidence and dependability that are predictors of adulthood employment and personal stability.

Bruce, while not discounting the “essential” importance of reading and writing ability as a key indicator of whether a student is on-track to graduate high school, supported Rumberger’s point saying, “[T]here’s been such a huge emphasis on certain types of test scores that there’s been less emphasis on other things that really matter.” In response, she said, the University of Chicago’s Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has undertaken research to explore the value of the types of skills Rumberger noted. CASEL conducted a meta-analysis published in 2011 that found “powerful evidence linking social and emotional learning to increased academic achievement.”

Finally, University of Southern California Athletic Director Pat Haden’s keynote illustrated the ways in which USC’s Division I university program seeks to shape the context in which sport exists. Haden, a former Rhodes Scholar, said his goal is to win athletic championships in an “honest ethical way,” while closing the education achievement gap between student-athletes and the rest of the student population. In addition working to improve grade point averages and the graduation rate, the athletic department delivers to every athlete’s locker an events calendar in the beginning of each month encouraging
attendance at intellectual, cultural and artistic events on campus and around the city. The department has organized athlete trips to the Huntington Library and Gardens, Getty Center, Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the on-campus Fisher Museum of Art. These activities are among a series of overt and “subliminal messages” to USC athletes intended to encourage them to have “a real college experience, not just an athletic experience.”

FUTURE RESEARCH

There were calls to explore the causal link between youth sports and academic success, as well as suggestions for new research methods and additional topics of inquiry. Sabo advocated an increased emphasis on “computational social science and the use of big data.” Hartmann noted that while most research has focused on high school sports, most young participants actually are engaged in different models of sports activity. Future research design should do a better job of taking into account differences in age, race, gender, economic status and sport type. Not enough is known about the differing impacts of sports as compared to other extracurricular activities. Most research has failed to probe the significance of the frequency, intensity and duration of sports activity. A particular shortcoming of studies to date has been the failure to systematically study why some sports programs are associated with academic success and others are not.

There was unanimous agreement that definitively proving a causal relationship would difficult. Some of that difficulty arises from the fact that athletes, particularly teenagers, tend to be a self-selected population. The same attributes that lead to success in sports may lead to success in other walks of

Pontifex’s research shows that there is a positive relationship between physical activity and cognitive skills, especially self-regulatory skills that “require planning, problem solving [and] conscious choices among alternatives.”
life. To put it another way, it is difficult to determine whether athletes who have been successful in school and the workplace would have had that success even without the opportunity to take part in youth sports.

Despite its elusiveness, causation did not seem to be a Holy Grail among researchers at the Summit. Sabo warned against pursuing “simplistic linear causal models and demanding that each link in the causal chain be totally empirically verified.” Michael Massoglia (University of Wisconsin) suggested that the value of establishing causation is “open to debate.” Massoglia, a sociologist, went on to say, “I think pure causality in the pure sciences can be very very difficult, whether it’s sports - whether it’s any kind of intervention - because so many things occur at the same time.” In researching youth sports, though, it is possible to “eliminate other potential causes” for the athletics-academics connection and thereby “move closer to causality.” Existing research techniques enable us to rule out many potential non-sport explanations “even if we can’t get to a purely causal relationship between sport and some outcome.”

In the context of a question about what program elements explain the academic success of sports programs like Students Run LA and how to effectively tell that story to the public, panel moderator Caitlin Morris (Nike Access to Sport) asked Massoglia to assess whether “pure causality” matters. He responded,  

To put it in perspective, I teach graduate methods on causality and statistics. I think [pure causality] is very hard to get to. I think when we say ‘causal’ what we really mean is, ‘Does this increase the likelihood that that happens?’ That’s not the same thing as saying, ‘It’s causal.’ I thing we can absolutely get to, ‘Does this increase the likelihood?’ I’m comfortable with that. I think that's important.
At the 2012 LA84 Foundation Summit, Don Sabo cited a large body of knowledge indicating a positive association between youth sports participation and academic success. While acknowledging the obvious need for additional research, he also advised the audience not to become preoccupied with trying to empirically prove every causal link in the relationship, adding, “We know enough to move forward.”

In that spirit, the LA84 Foundation will indeed move forward on the issue of youth sports and academic success. The 2013 LA84 Foundation will continue to explore how youth sports and young people’s school experiences are related. The 2013 Summit will proceed from the assumptions that youth sports programs have the power to improve academic success, program design and presentation are critical factors in that success, and the benefits of sports need to be communicated more effectively to a variety of audiences.

The 2013 edition on the Summit will focus on existing programs, how they operate and what outcomes they report. The 2013 conference will feature a close look at longitudinal data from the Beyond the Bell Middle School Sports Program, now in its sixth year in every Los Angeles Unified School District middle school.

In addition to providing a better understanding of what works and what does not, the 2013 summit will address the practical question of how to communicate the benefits associated with well run youth sports programs. The Summit will call on experts in communications and public relations to discuss how to make the case to parents, foundations, individual philanthropists, government officials, education administrators and the media.

The 2013 LA84 Foundation Summit will take place in Los Angeles in October 2013.
Selected Readings on Sports Participation, Exercise and Academic Achievement:


High School Sports & Educational Benefits: What We really Know and Don't Know. (PowerPoint) Don Sabo. 2012.


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LA84 Foundation

The LA84 Foundation is endowed with surplus funds from the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Our mission is to serve youth through sport and to increase knowledge of sport and its impact on people's lives.

The Foundation has committed more than $206 million to accomplish its mission since 1985. To date, more than 3 million boys and girls, and more than 1,100 youth sports organizations throughout Southern California have benefited from the endowment. They will be joined by many more in the years ahead.

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