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April 1996

## University Mentors: Integrating Former and Current Student-Athletes into Communities

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Charvez Foger

*Office of U.S. Senator Harry Reid*

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Abramson, Betty; Foger, Charvez; Neese, Sandra; and Watts, Daniel, "University Mentors: Integrating Former and Current Student-Athletes into Communities" (1996). *Different Perspectives on Majority Rules (1996)*. 18.

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## **University Mentors: Integrating Former and Current Student-Athletes into Communities**

### **Betty Abramson**

Washoe County Juvenile Services

### **Charvez Foger**

Office of U.S. Senator Harry Reid

### **Dr. Sandra Neese**

University of Nevada, Reno

### **Daniel Watts**

University of Nevada, Reno

**Two model programs to assimilate minority student-athletes in a predominantly white community provide examples of meaningful approaches to appreciating the variety of backgrounds, personal skills, and individual strengths of student-athletes.**

Athletes at the University of Nevada, Reno are often recruited from major cities where minority populations are abundantly represented. In the State of Nevada, 82% of the population is white and in Washoe County (Reno) only 2.4% of the residents are African-Americans. At the University of Nevada, Reno, 150 undergraduate and graduate students are African-American in a total population of 11,500.

Minority athletes are often separated from family strictures and community contacts through their acceptance of a University scholarship and subsequent transition from their high school or community college to a four-year institution. This can be a dramatic change for any student, but the cultural and social isolation is extremely challenging for a 20-year old boy living away from "home." Their university experience may more nearly parallel "work" as they leave comfortable surroundings to assume a "job" with high expectations of performance.

The University of Nevada, Reno has developed a model to assimilate minority student-athletes in a predominately white community. Mentor programs 1) define a productive role for them, 2) address a social issue, and 3) offer assistance/support throughout the endeavor. The athletes in two (2) different programs serve as mentors to youth who are on probation with Washoe County (Reno, Nevada) Department of Juvenile Services.

The first program [*returning student-athletes*] targets students who have left the University to pursue a career in athletics. If their career plans change, they are readmitted to complete their degree. The National Consortium for Academics and Sports assists them in exchange for their participation in community outreach service. One-on-one mentoring is one example of addressing issues that affect the development of young people (drug and alcohol abuse, academic achievement, gang violence, as well as race and ethnic sensitivity).

The second program [*current student-athletes*] is an outgrowth of a university human

ecology course in which a number of athletes were enrolled. A representative from juvenile services brought a number of young persons as guests. The exchange between those youth and the University students was the springboard for a mentoring program. Through communication between the University professor and the juvenile services Community Outreach Specialist, seven (7) student-athletes were paired with youth on probation. A weekly seminar was conducted to discuss approaches for handling challenging situations.

Probation officers have reported changes in self-confidence, redirection of interests from gang involvement to more constructive participation in school activities, and renewed interest in achieving academic success. One validation of the effectiveness of the program is whether the youth leave the probation roles. This is the case for more than half the mentees. Another indicator is that the juvenile who has a mentor is seldom re-arrested.

One student-athlete reported, "This is the best experience I've ever had in my life. It gave me a chance to give something back to the community." Another said that, "By serving as a mentor to troubled youth, I am repaying the debt I owe to an off-duty policeman who took me under his wing several years ago." A mentor summarized his experience by saying, "My mentee reminded me a lot of myself when I was his age. I was honest about what I did right and wrong as a kid. Because he trusted me, maybe he won't make the same mistakes."

These two (2) programs may serve as models for other predominately white institutions seeking meaningful approaches to appreciating the variety of backgrounds, personal skills, and individual strengths of student-athletes.

## **PRESENTERS**

**Betty Abramson**, after completing a degree in criminal justice at San Jose State University, California, worked as a hearing officer for juvenile, first time offenders in Florida. She is beginning her fourth year with Washoe County Department of Juvenile Services (Reno). In her current role, she coordinates a high school classroom of probationers, operates a tutor-mentoring program for juvenile probationers with volunteers in the community, and provides mentors for juvenile probation boys returning to the community from six months' incarceration in a Nevada training center. At present, Betty is coordinating mentoring programs at the University of Nevada, Reno with both current athletes and athletes who have returned to complete their degrees.

**Charvez Foger** was drafted to play professional football after completing a degree in business administration at the University of Nevada, Reno. Due to an injury, his career with the Dallas Cowboys and Pittsburgh Steelers was cut short. Charvez worked in Las Vegas as a marketing agent for State Farm Insurance. During his college years, he mentored at-risk youth at different schools. He is currently chairman of the Communication Relations Council at Job Corps that concentrates on the advancement of students. Charvez currently mentors students at McQueen High School, Washoe County Department of Juvenile Services, as well as the University. He has worked with U.S.

Senator Harry Reid's Reno office as regional representative since 1991.

**Sandra Neese**, as Associate Professor at the University of Nevada, Reno, created and coordinates the Human Ecology program. After completion of her Ph.D. at Texas A&M University, she has taught undergraduate and graduate classes, served as assistant to the Academic Vice President, been director of CATI-based survey research center, and coordinated a citizen leadership development program. Her research focuses on citizen participation in the decision-making process of local and state governments. Her teaching responsibilities are in public policy formation and administration of human services. She has created several outreach projects to offer the resources of the University in meeting the unmet needs of the community.

**Daniel Watts**, a senior on the University of Nevada Wolfpack basketball team, Daniel started all 57 games since transferring for Blinn Junior College as a junior. He was named to the first team of the all-Big West and is one of three players to be named Big West Conference Player of the Week twice this season. He led the Big West Conference and leads the country in field goal percentage (66.0 percent), is 13th in the conference in scoring, first in field goal percentage, first in blocks per game, and third in rebounds. He has served as a mentor for the past year. Even though he no longer receives academic credit for his effort, he continues to guide not only his mentee, but a younger brother as well. Daniel is an example of a student-athlete who has become a part of the community through his mentoring role as well as his participation in church life.