



The Benefits of the Braves Buddies Program for the Pembroke Community

Senior Project

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
The Esther G. Maynor Honors College
University of North Carolina at Pembroke

By

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Mass Communication
May 9, 2021

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Acknowledgements

I would like to offer a special thanks to Dr. Joshua Busman for being my senior project coordinator and helping me develop the idea for my senior project. I am particularly grateful for the valuable and constructive suggestions given by my faculty mentor Jack “Bull” Slavin. His willingness to discuss ideas and review my work has been very much appreciated. I would like to thank the following people for their time and thoughts during the video interviews: Dick Christy, Traci Brooks, Amanda Hamrin, and Delsin Burkhart. Each person shared their personal stories and expressed their great interest in helping the community through Braves Buddies. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the support provided by my family during the preparation of my senior honors project.

Abstract

The Braves Buddies program was developed to promote literacy in Robeson County, which faces educational deficits. UNCP Athletics sends student-athletes to Pembroke Elementary to work with the children and motivate them to learn and stay in school. Braves Buddies provides the elementary school kids with role models in the local area. Video interviews were conducted to learn how this program benefits everyone involved. UNCP Athletic Director, Dick Christy, shared about how the project was started and the vision behind giving back to the local community. Traci Brooks from Pembroke Elementary told how the program helps her as a teacher and her students. Student athletes, Amanda Hamrin and Delsin Burkhart, explained how important it is to show the kids that an education is crucial and that to become a student-athlete you have to succeed in the classroom first.

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UNC Pembroke's Athletic Department currently partners with Pembroke Elementary for the Braves Buddies program. Braves Buddies was formed in the Fall of 2015 to promote the significance of leadership, literacy, mentorship, and fitness. Each week UNCP Athletics sends members from one of the sixteen varsity teams to Pembroke Elementary on Tuesday or Wednesday morning. The student-athletes are able to read books aloud or listen to the kids read to them. The children receive more individualized attention when the student-athletes are present in the classroom. The number of teaching assistants has decreased resulting in a student to teacher ratio of 19 to 1 at Pembroke Elementary (Robeson County North). This has resulted in a lack of one-on-one attention for students that is in part addressed by this program. Braves Buddies allows teachers to work with student's one-on-one that might be struggling with a certain subject.

Robeson County has one of the lowest reading levels in elementary school kids in the state, which then can lead to higher dropout rates. Robeson County's reading proficiency score is 27% and the statewide average is 47% (Robeson County North). Robeson County also has a 23% drop out rate while the national average is only 5.3% (Robeson County North). Programs such as Braves Buddies can help to bring these numbers closer to the state and national averages.

UNCP Athletics hopes that through this program they can encourage the students to stay in school and excite them about learning. Traci Brooks, first grade teacher at Pembroke Elementary, said "the children were just a little more motivated each week to get to participate in the activities that the Braves Buddies did" (The Benefits, 00:02:08). Having the student-athletes in the elementary school can

inspire the kids to work hard and give the elementary school students role models within their community. According to the UNCP website, the first core value for UNCP is its commitment to serving the local region (University). Braves Buddies provides the student-athletes with the ability to give back to the community that supports them.

As of right now Braves Buddies is only taking place at Pembroke Elementary. After UNCP Athletics won the Peach Belt Conference's Connecting Communities Award other teachers in the area started asking how they could get Braves Buddies to come to their school. UNCP Athletic Director, Dick Christy, hopes that the program can branch out to other schools in the future, but right now does not believe it is feasible for the student-athletes. He is worried about the strain it would add to student-athletes by adding more activities to their schedules that are already full with schoolwork, practices and other extracurriculars.

As a student-athlete, I believe that the Braves Buddies program is so beneficial to the students and teachers that it would be an incredible opportunity for the community if student athletes were sent to other elementary schools in the local area besides Pembroke Elementary School. There are 39 public schools in Robeson County and 22 or 56%, were low performing in 2019 (Robeson County Attainment). The program was started because Robeson County has one of the lowest reading levels and the educational deficits are seen throughout the county so we should try to make an impact at other schools that are also struggling. I understand that participating in the Braves Buddies program adds another responsibility to an already busy student athlete's life, but based off of my own

experiences and after interviewing other student athletes I think it is possible for athletes to volunteer at other elementary schools.

There are three public elementary schools within seven miles of UNCP that have high student-to-teacher ratios. Union Chapel Elementary is less than five miles from the university and they have a student to teacher ratio of 18 to 1 (Robeson County North). Deep Branch Elementary is less than seven miles from and they also have a student to teacher ratio of 18 to 1. Normally each athletic team would go to Pembroke Elementary once a semester, and if we expanded to these two additional schools each team would need to go approximately once a month. I believe it is possible for student-athletes to donate an hour of their time a month back into the community that does so much to support UNCP Athletics. The statistics above show that the time sacrificed by student athletes could be life changing for these students.

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Video Transcript

Dick Christy: Braves Buddies program, when it got started here at UNC Pembroke and our Association with the athletic department, really was just like every other good idea, was stolen from somewhere else. My wife, Windy, as we were working on our strategic plan and talking about how we want to engage in the community, she had mentioned a program that I used to do as a student athlete where we had worked with the local elementary school. One of my teammates, his wife was a schoolteacher at the elementary school down the street and we started going and interacting with her class and next thing you know it turned into not just the golf team, but athletic department wide event. So through some partnerships here in town and getting to know the right people with the elementary school, Andrea Jacobs in our department is related to some of the leadership over there or was related to some of the leadership over there and was able to connect us with people that saw the merit in getting college age student athletes who could be great mentors and great role models for very impressionable 5 to 8-year-olds and getting an opportunity for them to, you know, learn more about why reading is important and start to see and aspire to try and get to college. So, we really focused on literacy and reading, and I think overtime it morphed into, you know the teachers are really just looking for that interaction with the students and the students would start to look forward to when the college students would come in.

Traci Brooks: The benefits of this program, when it first started at our school, and the students were introduced to the athletes and the other administrators that would actually

come out as well. They were very excited seeing someone different coming into the classroom, either reading with them, playing games, the various different activities that they did. They were just excited and hyper. Each week they would say is it time for Brave Buddies? Are they coming? The children were just a little more motivated each week to get to participate in the activities that the Braves Buddies did. And before it's like it was just, you know, just a normal day. Same old things going on. They were missing out on some type of motivational piece.

Dick Christy: I mean I think it's interesting, the communication and the collaboration with Pembroke Elementary was great. You know, after the first year they said you know what, we've loved you working with the 2nd graders, but we really think you could even make a bigger impact working with 1st graders. You know, let's get them a year earlier and then you know the metamorphosis where sometimes when we go in, we're not necessarily reading to the students. You know, they actually said, you know what we struggle with now with the lack of teaching assistance is giving them an opportunity to read out loud. You know, we may even have the students read to you. The vision for selecting something like that, we know that there's some educational deficits in our area, right? And we wanted to make sure that we could have as big of an impact on that as possible and fill any role there. The other thing too, for us is, you know, we've got the strength of 400 athletes and 16 programs. Now when you get everybody pulling in the same direction, you have a chance for such a bigger impact and something that's more meaningful and lasting and the chance to say you know this is going to be our Department focus and this is what SAACs going to take the lead on. And this is how we

were going to do it. It just gave us a chance to have a lot more staying power and a bigger impact.

Amanda Hamrin: We start by coming there in the morning and you know, we get separated into different classrooms, the student athletes. And we get to get the opportunity to, you know, go in the classroom and help the teachers with what they're doing for that morning. So, it can be everything from reading books for the kids, it can be helping with math problems, spelling exercises. And just like be there and help support.

Delsin Burkhart: When you walk in there like all the kids are just going to stare at you, because they're like, who's this person walking in our classroom and then also meeting the teachers and they introduce you. And then knowing that they also enjoy what you're doing coming in to talk and relate with the kids.

Dick Christy: Anytime that you get a chance to get your brand which you know the best advocates we have our current students and our student athletes to get them out in the community and for people to see, you know, there's definitely people in our community that maybe didn't go to UNC Pembroke or don't have a direct connection. I think it's not many, but there's definitely some, so a chance for their student to come home and talk in an excited way about, you know, I got to meet one of the Braves and I got to meet somebody from the golf team or football team or whatever it might be. It just helps that community support for athletes, and I think it comes full circle.

Traci Brooks: The Braves buddies program benefits myself as a teacher as having a collaboration with UNC Pembroke and public schools of Robeson County and Pembroke Elementary. Just for the kids, knowing once you complete elementary, middle school, and high school, they can look to the future as to where they may attend college and if they actually see you know, college students coming in and they talk about their college experience, then the students will get in their mind, okay if I work really hard and do you know various things that I can to become a student at UNC Pembroke and achieve my goals as also for being an athlete and as a student as well.

Amanda Hamrin: Program benefits me as a student athlete in a way that I get to come out to the community, and you know, I get to support the community that supports me. So, you know, they're always here for us, supporting us at games. And, you know, supporting the school and the Braves Club and everything of that. So, I think it's a great opportunity for us to student athletes to give back to the community that is giving so much to us.

Traci Brooks: The program benefits my students. They serve as role models. Usually when I have them coming into my classroom, I let them introduce themselves, tell what sport they play, and also talk about what type of academics they have to have in order to be a student athlete and that sort of there takes the initiative for students. Okay if I want to be a student athlete, I've got to have good grades.

Amanda Hamrin: What it means for the kids to look up at me as a role model? You know, I want to show them the best, the best of, you know, how student athletes should

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behave. And you know I want to be a good person to look up to. I want to show them that everything is possible. You know, even me coming from Sweden, you know, get the opportunity to play college golf and get the opportunity to get an education. I think that every young woman out there should be able to get that same opportunity in life.

Traci Brooks: Some good memories I've had with the student athletes visiting the classroom, especially like with basketball players, my children are first graders, so they're you know, kind of short and they look up and like oh wow, you are so tall. And I've had some visiting the classroom that are from actually other countries, so we've put up maps. They've shown them how far it is to their house and they just actually get to see how far students travel to come to UNCP. Football players and wrestlers, they actually get down and intermingle with them and just try to have fun doing activities with them and just show them what it's like to have, you know, someone they're like a big cuddly teddy bear, you know, working with them. But it's just been an awesome experience to meet lots of new students, people, even local, far away. It's just been a great program to have.

Amanda Hamrin: My favorite memory from participating in Brave Buddies is of course just to get out there and, you know, meet all of these kids. But there was this one particular time where I had to go, I had to, I got the opportunity to go up on this big TV screen and show them where Sweden was located and show them where I'm from and it was very, it was a fun moment because the kids just talked about like there's Mexico,

there's North Carolina. And it was just fun to, you know, see how excited they were, not really about Sweden, but to just see the world map and learn.

Traci Brooks: When the students enter my classroom, you know, either I give them something to work with the kids on, some type of game, or reading and we also talk about the importance that academic has in a child's life and in order to be a student athlete, you must first be an academic student first. In order to achieve these goals, you know, you must continue to stay on the right path, have good grades, work, study hard, and without these things, you're not going to be able to become a student athlete. And once the student athletes, you know, give their examples of well, I had to do this in school, work really hard and actually played sports too, because if I don't then I won't be able to participate in the sport of my choice. So really, they also, you know, give examples of their own little testimony about their life.

Delsin Burkhart: It's important to show the kids that I'm just not only an athlete, but I'm a student athlete because as we grow up, you have to understand the importance of in order to go have fun outside the classroom, you need to do what's in the classroom.

Amanda Hamrin: I think it's also important to show them that you know we are college students as well as athletes. You know, you get to show them the fun with sports and for me golf. But it's also important, to you know, show them that school is also important and you know going out to Braves Buddies and help them in school, it's not a sports day, it's actually academics.

Dick Christy: First questions we started to get as it got more publicity was hey, you know, teachers 10 miles away, how do we get this at our school? How do we get this impact? So, trying to strike that balance between having a broader community impact and still being sensitive to the strains and the stresses on a student athlete and their time, you know, how we can efficiently, effectively get them into the schools and back is definitely something that I think we'd like to grow into we're just not there yet and figuring out how to make that work without adding undue strain on our student athletes, too.