

Sidebar: Know Greater Heroes

One College's Commitment to Community

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On March 23, 2008...

...the Salt Lake Community College men's basketball team spent the morning of the biggest game in its players' lives at an elementary school. Kevin Brening, the team's host for the NJCAA National Championship tournament in Hutchinson, Kansas was so impressed with the character of SLCC's players staying in his house that when he heard about the "Know Greater Heroes" program, he arranged for the players to conduct a rally at his daughters' school.

So, instead of working on their jump shots, just hours prior to playing in the game that would be for the right to play for a national championship, a group of players got in the team bus and went to talk to 600 K-6 graders at Holy Cross Elementary School. The school's entire student body was treated to an impromptu presentation on friendship, teamwork, goal setting, leadership, and basketball.

The Know Greater Heroes program takes SLCC players into hundreds of local elementary schools throughout Utah for engaging, high-energy assemblies. These young audiences get to hear and see real leaders up close who excel in sports and who live right in their own community.

Student athletes might learn even more from the program than the elementary school kids. Not that it's always comfortable or easy for them. "When we first started out in this program, I know a lot of us were pretty shy or scared. Talking in front of people isn't really our thing," said Brian Green. "But the program is really a great opportunity for us. Lots of times, I think we get more out of it than the kids we see, because it really makes us deal with the issues we have. We come out [of the program] with a lot more poise and confidence that we take onto the court with us."

All SLCC athletics teams have been involved in the leadership program since 2004 that provides 30,000 Utah school children each year with positive role models and the message of choosing sports instead of drugs. More than twice each week during the school year, the athletes perform at a different elementary school. The program is built into the college curriculum, and is considered a major part of the student athletes' academic and social development.

Nearly 90 percent of SLCC student athletes participate in leadership development activities. The retention rate among SLCC athletes is almost identical to this number. Three of the college's five sports had a perfect 100 percent retention rate. The other two had 92 percent and 70 percent rates. About two-thirds of all SLCC student athletes are recruited to continue their playing careers by four-year institutions, and three-fourths move on to attend college at four-year schools. Leading these future leaders is a decorated coaching staff comprised of individuals at the top of their professions. SLCC's players are learning from the best. Three of the five coaches have won national and regional Coach of the Year honors for their sports.

Focusing primarily on Federal Title I schools—schools with high concentrations of students at significant risk of failing to meet state academic achievement standards—the program targets an important audience. “We get student athletes that come here from all kinds of backgrounds,” said Athletic Director Norma Carr. “Some need more attention and guidance than others. It’s rewarding to see those athletes especially go into the schools and make a difference in young people’s lives who also really need someone to look up to.”

It’s even more rewarding when the athletes as role models go on to athletic achievement. “It’s pretty cool to go to the assemblies and be introduced as ‘National Champions,’” said Lesean Wilcox. “You can see the kids’ eyes get bigger when they hear that.”