

# Dr. Venessa Brown leads special mentoring program for SIUE

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**EDWARDSVILLE** - When an **SIUE basketball player** seeks assistance on and off the court, there's ample support.

A campus faculty/staff mentoring system is percolating, thanks to **Dr. Venessa Brown**, associate chancellor for the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion. The mentoring program is her brainchild, and it's a labor of love the way she cares for her creation. Dr. Brown has nurtured it on the men's side for eight years. She equally embraces the women's mentoring program, a full-fledged activity this year.

"This is something I have always wanted to do for the student-athletes," Brown said. "I'm a sports person and have always loved sports. I was on the faculty as professor and chair of the social work department when we started the conversation in 2007 with men's basketball."

"Lennox Forrester (former coach) was here and he embraced it. Dr. [Brad Hewitt](#), the director of athletics, has extended my career through athletics at SIUE and I'm forever grateful for that."

Everyone at SIUE is grateful for what Brown has begun. She even donated her own funds to build a players' mentoring room, dedicated in her honor, nearly six years ago. It's adjacent to the players' locker room in the Vadalabene Center.

"I can't say enough about what Dr. Brown has done with the mentoring program," SIUE Men's Head Coach [Jon Harris](#) said. "It's huge for us and this is the first place I've been that has had a mentoring program. The mentors take time out to spend with the guys. It's not just about basketball. It's about life in general."

SIUE women's basketball Head Coach [Paula Buscher](#) is just as enthusiastic about what the mentoring program provides for her basketball team.

"I think the mentoring program is something special and I give credit to Dr. Brown for starting it because it's her 'baby,' if you will," Buscher said. "What makes it so special is there are so many good people on campus, and they give their time and talent to help student-athletes."

January is National Mentor Month and Jan. 25th is National Mentoring Day. SIUE has more than its share of willing mentors for basketball players. The men's and women's basketball teams encourage the mentoring program that aims to enhance the relationship between faculty/staff and student-athletes.

The program specifically focuses on helping students manage academic success and athletic competition during and after the winter basketball season.

St. Louisan Donshel Beck and Riga, Latvia, native Elina Berzina, members of the women's team, said the mentoring program speaks volumes. Both are juniors.

"My mentor (Shelley Price-Williams) goes to all of the games and she's very supportive," Beck said. "She's very smart and interested in what I'm doing in basketball and school. She has been a big help and the mentoring program is really good. I like it."

Berzina said her mentor (Sherrie Senkfor) has been instrumental in sharing sound advice.

"I love her. She is like a big sister," Berzina said. "She goes to the games and will message me after the games to see how I am doing. She keeps up to date on things and that's nice to have someone doing that for you. I would definitely recommend the mentoring program."

Men's player Burak Eslik, a native of Istanbul, Turkey, has Dr. Brown and Dr. Marcus Agustin as mentors and he cherishes their input and guidance. Eslik, a senior guard, spent two years at Lewis and Clark Community College before transferring to SIUE.

"She is an amazing lady, and I'm definitely blessed to have her," Eslik said. "It's a personal relationship and the mentors will talk to you about anything. I've never experienced something like this. They are great people."

"We have one mentor for every student-athlete basketball player or about 30 in all," Dr. Brown pointed out. "The mentoring is not only helpful for students but to the faculty and staff."

Take it from some of faculty/staff participants. They couldn't agree more. That's why Brown has an abundance of them willing to donate their time.

"We always have more mentors than students," she said. "People really wanted to get involved in it."

Dr. Flo Maatita of the sociology department, Dr. Price-Williams of the school of business and Senkfor, the director of human resources, are among the mentors making the most of a welcome opportunity.

"It's my first year of mentoring women and the second year for mentoring the men," Maatita said. "I like being a part of it and even though the athletes are pressed for time, it's impressive how they manage their time between academics and athletics. It's important to me and refreshing for me because I want them to know that the faculty supports them."

Price-Williams said, "It's my first year for women's basketball, and I really like it. I have a long history of being involved in women's basketball because I was the team manager in high school so women's athletics are close to my heart. What I've learned is that the student-athletes have a lot of confidence in themselves and they seem to have a very good handle balancing academics and athletics."

"It's my second year as a mentor in the program and I have met the most amazing kids," Senkfor noted. "As a mentor, what you want to do is support the mentees and give them a different perspective. I love working with young adults and I get a lot out of it. I

always encourage our staff to get involved with their students and this program gives them the opportunity to do it."

Brown said the possibilities of expanding the mentoring program are endless.

Track and field could be the next sport benefiting from it, and Dr. Brown said she is willing to work with any coach to help get the program started. Many teams already have followers, and it would be nice to have them as mentors.

"It's about helping students on and off the court, having support in the classroom and building new relationships," Brown said. "My biggest role is motivation and the four P's: potential, power, purpose and presence."

She pointed out, "It takes hard work to be an athlete and most of our students are good students and very respectful. Getting involved in the program means so much to me. I feel like I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing."