DURHAM, N.C. – When Dr. Joel Rosch, a researcher at Duke University’s Center For Child and Family Policy, spoke to the Duke football team about research opportunities and details of his own work, it didn’t take long for three Blue Devils to express interest in tackling projects of their own.

Greg Akinbiyi and Vince Oghobaase each got set up with Rosch on independent study projects, while Marvin Marcelin was put in contact with another Duke professor from the Center For Child & Family Policy – research scientist Dr. Ann Brewster.

The center has a number of projects going on with the potential for this type of activity. Its director, Dr. Kenneth Dodge, encourages branching out and taking on new directions of study – which became a win-win for the Duke football trio, which then worked out the details of their projects with Leslie Lacin, assistant director of academic support for Duke Athletics.

“I wanted them to get the chance to do this to integrate them into the regular student body,” said Lacin. “Because of the time constraints of student-athletes, they don’t always have the same opportunities that other students do to work outside of the classroom and really explore their interests. But these professors made it happen.”

Akinbiyi and Oghobaase are both sociology majors, while Akinbiyi is also pursuing a certificate in human development at Duke. They each worked with Rosch – Akinbiyi on the external signs of gang activity and Oghobaase on high school dropout rates in America. Marcelin, a psychology major, worked with Brewster to develop an intervention strategy to improve the problem of dropping out among middle school students.

For all three, the projects allowed the individuals to explore areas they were interested in while learning time management skills in the process, as much of their research and workload actually came during the 2008 football season. It also gave them a chance to gain experience they may not have received in a traditional classroom setting.

When Rosch was approached by Lacin about the concept of the projects in the first place, he knew immediately it was something he and the student-athletes would benefit from undertaking.

“When Leslie asked me to speak to the football team, it sounded like a great idea,” he said. “I ended up being matched up with two students who had similar interests to what my work deals with, and having students like them work on these projects is terrific – [in Vince’s case] sometimes young people aren’t always willing to open up to older people like me, and he was great at dealing with his subjects.”

“I think they both learned that this isn’t textbook stuff. It was real-world stuff, which is what’s great about Duke, that they let their students get involved in this type of research.”
Akinbiyi’s work on gangs got started as he and Rosch met to discuss how to go about analyzing the problem from different angles. Rosch explained that there exists a lot of literature linking the physical environment and appearance of a certain community to the existence, or nonexistence, of a gang. Akinbiyi developed what Rosch called a “windshield survey,” which he executed by driving around and observing different communities both in the Durham area and in his hometown of Miami.

“Greg would go out during the day and observe the communities and their physical environment, which allows you to identify factors and distinguish a crime area from an area that is free from crime,” Rosch said.

Akinbiyi developed an instrument over time using trial and error. If something didn’t work, he changed it. If it did, he expanded it.

“It’s funny that sometimes people make judgments about a place based on what it looks like or what kind of a person is there, but really there are certain things that can clue you in on whether or not a gang is present – like certain writing or markings,” said Akinbiyi.

“It was interesting to do work outside the classroom on my own. It came out to be something that could be put to use and really solve a problem. I learned to adjust things and make changes in my work, and I really took a lot out of it.”

Rosch knew Oghobaase previously from class, and encouraged him to take on the project about dropout prevention. Rosch works frequently with the state department, and worked with Oghobaase on developing a program that the state could actually develop and implement.

“By going to community colleges where they give GED’s, I’d been intrigued by things the kids said,” said Rosch. “I wondered how that would apply in Durham, so Vince ended up doing a viral survey to get a feel for this area and what would lead kids to drop out.”

“He’s a great, outgoing, personable guy, and very easy to talk to, so he was good at engaging the subjects and he did an excellent job.”

Oghobaase and Rosch met last summer and planned to have Oghobaase work during the fall semester – along with his football commitments.

“Dr. Rosch told me about the project he had been working on – why students drop out, some of the reasons there. I conducted interviews, asked some of the GED students why they dropped and compared that to the literature I had read. I found that a lot of it was similar to what my subjects said.”

Oghobaase used his findings to draw conclusions and come up with solutions to the problems. He then wrote a paper about it to complete the project.

“I found that the reason why a lot of high school students dropped out was that they’re not in a good situation back home or their environment is bad, and their teachers are not helping them as much as they should be helping them in school,” Oghobaase said. “Teachers let them drop by the wayside
sometimes. It’s not that kids don’t want to learn, but if they see a kid that comes from a low
socioeconomic background, they automatically assume that they don’t want to work. That’s why
kids don’t get help they need. It’s not that they don’t care, it’s that people don’t care about them.”

For Marcelin, the experience was similar although he worked with middle school students. His
independent study project involved him waking up early every Monday during his own football
season to travel with Brewster to a school that was almost an hour away from Durham.

“He’d have to meet me at 7 a.m. to get there on time, and on the way he’d be reviewing what he
was going to speak to the students about,” said Brewster, whose own work involves the
implementation of intervention programs for middle school dropouts using different tactics to help them set goals for themselves. “I used to give Marvin the reigns and he would take charge. He
would decide what the kids would work on, and was very creative and innovative with it. He was
very organized. I asked him to think critically and he did.”

Every Wednesday, Marcelin and Brewster would meet to plan the next week’s session. At the end
of the semester, Marcelin wrote a paper with his findings, which Brewster said was amazing and
has the potential to actually be implemented. A grant for the project is currently in the works.

“Sometimes when you work with students, it’s easy just to let their work die and I don’t want to let
that happen,” Brewster said. “Not only did he come up with great work, but he went and talked to a
middle school football team about the demands of being a student-athlete. The kids wrote Marvin
thank-you notes. I think he got as much out of the whole thing as the kids did. They were sad if he
ever couldn’t be there. They loved him.”

Marcelin said that while at first he wondered if the kids just looked up to him because he was a
Duke football player, he quickly learned that they were more interested in his message.

“I think they realized we put our pants on one leg at a time just like they do,” he said.

While he acknowledged that the early hours were hard to keep, it was always worth it once he got
there and started working with the kids on that week’s lesson, whether it was role playing or having
them make their own business cards.

“I was able to emphasize to them the importance of staying in school and working hard, and it’s
good to know I actually got through to them,” Marcelin said. “I think this is something I might like
to do in the future after graduation and it’s cool to think that my plan might actually be used and
make a difference.”

“The first thing Marvin would emphasize is that he works hard, which is important to get across to
the students,” added Brewster. “He is also an academic person, and he works hard at everything he
does. That’s a great message to get out to the people at Duke, too. I hope others like him come
along. Whenever I work with students, I want them to feel that they are able to come up with
something original and important, and this was a very good opportunity for Marvin to step into that
and see that he could do anything. It was a model experience for me, and I hope it was for him,
too.”
Rosch knows that although student-athletes are often pressed for time and might not get the chance to do the things other students do, it is possible for student-athletes to pursue an interest off the field or outside the classroom.

“I think being a student-athlete definitely has more assets than liabilities when working in cases like this,” said Rosch. “Kids look up to them, and they know how to talk to all different kinds of people. They have a physical presence. They bring a lot of different insights because they come from diverse backgrounds. They have really added a lot to our efforts.”

Captured March 31, 2009