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Athletic director encourages diversity on campus

By Christine Thurston
Staff Writer

Walk up to nearly any African-American student on the UMaine campus and they're likely to be an athlete. That's because about 90 percent of the 70 African-Americans here are athletes.

Suzanne Tyler, director of athletics, was asked to speak at the NAACP meeting Sunday night about just that topic.

"There is concern over the large number of African-Americans on the football and basketball teams and the lack of African-Americans in the regular populace," said James Varner, president of the Greater Bangor NAACP.

Varner said that he has recently spoken to several football players who wish the university would recruit more African-American females and coaches of color.

Before coming to Maine, Tyler worked as a coach and administrator at the University of Maryland, an area with a much higher minority population. With that in mind, she understands the importance of creating opportunities for minorities, athletes and students.

"We (the athletic department) do work closely with admissions and we're proud of the numbers we do have, but I wish there was a more diverse community for them to come to," Tyler said.

Tyler said that the distance to the university may play a role in not being able to recruit many African-Americans.

"When you get to Boston and you still have five hours to go, Maine doesn't look so good," Tyler said. "It's not the end of the

world, but you can see it from here."

Tyler said the university is trying to recruit in the Buffalo, NY area because the climates and environments are similar. Those students are more likely to enjoy living in Maine than are students from Florida.

A great deal of concern comes from trying to retain coaches once they are here. The athletic department nearly lost Shawn Frazier, the assistant football coach, to a better job at Boston University.

"We had to create a position to keep him here, he is a valuable asset," Tyler said.

Frazier currently works as a liaison between multicultural affairs, student affairs, the athletic department and the African-American athletes themselves in order to give them a voice.

Tyler said that she recently offered the job of an academic support worker to two men of color. The job would have entailed working with student athletes as a mentor and helping to structure their coursework. Neither ended up taking the position.

"We're also trying to get volunteer mentors paired up with athletes studying the same profession," Tyler said.

Tyler said it was quite a surprise to find out that there are no full-time tenured African-American faculty at UMaine.

Varner mentioned that the NAACP has a listing of possible candidates for a variety of jobs.

"We're not saying we want a person of color in the position just because they are a person of color, we want them because they are qualified," Varner said.

Varner said that a major worry is that athletes are exploited by colleges and then



University of Maine Athletic Director Suzanne Tyler speaks about minority concerns at the NAACP meeting Sunday night in the Sutton Lounge. (Newell Photo.)

don't graduate.

Tyler said that according to the six-year rating system, UMaine graduates 54 percent of its entire student body and 53 percent of its scholarship athletes, without taking transfers into account.

Tyler said that although the NCAA has a rule that they can only give 5 years of scholarship aid, they will direct athletes in getting student loans.

"Our graduation rate is actually above the norm, Tyler said.