In 2001 the university established its most prestigious research honor, the Harry Reid Silver State Research Award, in recognition of the achievements of UNLV scholars in a wide variety of disciplines. Named for the U.S. senator who has been a longtime supporter of UNLV, the award recognizes faculty researchers who exemplify a commitment to advancing understanding of an array of issues that address the changing needs of our community, state, and nation. In 2013, the university awarded its most prestigious research award to UNLV psychology professor Brad Donohue for his work in developing family-supported interventions to assist in goal achievement.

As a graduate student in the late 1980s, psychology professor Brad Donohue was part of a research team that developed a clinical protocol known as Family Behavior Therapy, now commonly referred to as FBT. The team was led by the late renowned psychologist Nathan Azrin, one of the first students in B.F. Skinner’s laboratory at Harvard to apply principles of reinforcement to enhance mental health in humans. Azrin was considered one of the pioneers of behavioral analysis, Donohue says, adding that he considers himself fortunate to have worked with Azrin.

Their research resulted in the development of FBT, which uses community-based reinforcement to help people enhance their relationships and personal conduct, avoid substance misuse, and improve employment and school performance. "FBT involves a holistic ‘family,’ or team approach, to goal achievement," says Donohue, who has applied FBT in a variety of contexts, conducting research on its effectiveness and helping clients along the way. "We teach individuals how to set and reach goals using rewards as a catalyst for...

What Do Families and Teams Have in Common?

They both have built-in support groups, and they’re both subjects of interest to Brad Donohue. The UNLV psychology professor takes the principles of Family Behavior Therapy and applies them in a variety of contexts, including athletic performance.

Story by Scott Lien
Photography by R. Marsh Starks

UNLV psychology professor Brad Donohue received a four-year, $2 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to study the efficacy of Family Behavior Therapy among college athletes.
Donohue’s research has primarily focused on analyzing the efficacy of FBT in clinical environments. He and his team have seen FBT reduce alcohol and drug use, improve mood, and family functioning; and augment the treatment protocol being used by clinicians across the country today. He himself has analyzed the efficacy of FBT in clinical environments and monitored with a team of UNLV students and faculty a staff. Donohue helped young people deal with real-world employment experiences and gave them financial management training. His study on the effectiveness of this program was the first to evaluate such programs using controlled methodology in an ethnic minority youth population. The outcomes were again very positive, with many of the participating improving their knowledge of financial management and employment-related efforts, Donohue says. Today, Donohue's work is under his passion for FBT to a new genre–college athletics. In 2012 he received a four-year, $2 million grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to study the efficacy of a performance-based FBT among collegiate athletes. "This was the first grant award of its kind by the National Institutes of Health," Donohue says. He adds that NIH is interested in understanding how traditional, individual-based counseling (which is offered through UNLV’s Counseling and Psychological Services) and family-based performance programming (using FBT) enhance goal achievement in student athletes.

"FBT has identified five primary areas in his current study: management of or abstinence from substance use; avoidance of unsafe or risky sexual behaviors; reduced substance use; improved quality of life; and return to school. Donohue has named the family-based experimental program "TOPPS," which stands for "The Optimum Performance Program in Sports," and he is very clear about its goals. "This is a coaching program to help student athletes achieve optimum performance," he says. "It is designed to train elite athletes and coaches in optimum sport and life performance through applied research, with an emphasis on sports and academic performance." In addition to conducting performance research with athletes, Donohue and his team have developed several sub-study performance curriculums at TOPPS to assist athletes in achieving their goals. They address impulsive control, financial management, social communication skills, emotional management, and career planning.

"While TOPPS is open to all student athletes to assist in any performance-related issue, Donohue is especially interested in working with athletes who have identified drugs or alcohol as a factor in negative performance. He noted that college athletes face unique stressors that put them at increased risk of substance use or misusing substances. According to Donohue, nationwide data suggests that more than 50 percent of students in college, including student athletes, participate in dangerous alcohol and drug use patterns, such as binge drinking. Once his current study has been completed, Donohue hopes to explore whether TOPPS is effective with high school and college athletes, and TOPPS team coordinator Yulia Gavrilova was a competitive swimmer in Russia. Donohue himself was a national amateur boxing champion in 1986, and he has served on several athletic commissions and as a consultant to various teams at UNLV.

"We teach individuals how to set and reach goals using rewards as a catalyst for achievement. These are goal-oriented therapies," – Brad Donohue

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ifers to examine the efficacy of a home-based FBT Compared with the usual forms of treat- ment, FBT showed very promising outcomes, resulting in an increase in employee retention and a reduction of child maltreatment potential, as well as a diminished hard drug use. However, Donohue believes additional research in this area should be conducted to determine which mothers respond best to FBT. Donohue led another project working with Clark County, this time with the Busi- ness Development Division, as well as the City of Las Vegas to facilitate higher-order employment and economic prosperity among disadvantaged families. He notes that student athletes have the added burden of performing at optimum levels, and any significant others who are considered part of the ‘family’ unit.

Donohue is optimistic about the future use of the TOPPS approach in the context of sports. If his research demonstrates the efficiency of FBT/TOPPS, it could be used as the model to improve performance among sports teams across the country.