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Progressive Programs

Stepping Up

When people hear about bystander intervention, it's usually in connection with an assault case or other crime. But have you ever thought about how the idea could help stop problems seen on athletic teams like hazing, drinking, drug use, eating disorders, or depression?

Becky Bell has. Associate Athletics Director and the Director of Life Skills at the University of Arizona, Bell is the founder of Step Up!, a bystander intervention program created with college student-athletes in mind.

"As I was sitting in a presentation on bystander intervention and sexual assault in 2006, I started thinking that the concept really applies to all the different issues we see on college campuses--specifically in athletics," she says. "But all the programs in place were centered around bystander intervention in sexual assault cases only."

So Bell went through the two-year process of creating Step Up!, and in conjunction with the NCAA and other organizations, made it available to athletic departments free-of-charge. Anyone with access to a computer can download program materials, including a PowerPoint presentation and videos, to implement Step Up! on their own campus--including high schools and non-athletic groups.

With the motto, "Be a Leader, Make a Difference," the three-hour training session encourages student-athletes to take on a leadership role in stopping dangerous or harmful situations. That could include a team hazing ritual or pressuring a first-year team member to binge drink. It also means noticing if a teammate is depressed, has an eating disorder, or is in an abusive relationship.

"At Arizona, we begin our initial trainings by asking participants if they've been in a situation where they sensed something wasn't right and they wanted to help, but didn't," Bell says. "Every hand goes up every time. Then we ask if they think intervention would have helped in that situation, and 90 percent of the hands go up."

Through the program, student-athletes learn the five decision-making steps to successful intervention. The first is to recognize a problem, and the second is to interpret it as a problem.

"A student might be too busy with classes, practices, team meetings, and schoolwork to notice that a teammate is acting differently," Bell says. "Or they may be distracted from a verbally abusive conversation going on next to them because they are on their cell phone. We ask students to become more observant of what's going on around them and stop what they're doing if they get a feeling that something isn't right."

The third step is to assume personal responsibility for intervening. "Research shows us that when you're alone, you're going to help 80 percent of the time, and when you're in a group, you're only going to help 20 percent of the time," Bell says. "We're saying, 'Take it upon yourself to help, regardless of whether anyone else is.'"

The fourth step is having the know-how to step up. "We teach students about direct help, which is jumping in and telling your teammate you're worried about them," Bell says. "And we teach them about indirect help--talking to a school psychologist or to your athletic trainer about what you or the professional might be able to do."

Finally, the fifth step is actually intervening. In this part of the training, students discuss the risks and rewards of taking action. Potential risks include going against the group, embarrassing yourself, and the fear that your help will not be effective. But the reward could be that a teammate with a problem seeks help or merely thanks you for caring.

In order to implement Step Up!, an administrator or counselor can attend a 90-minute Webinar hosted by Bell and use downloadable resources. "The materials are very user-friendly and written in common language," says Valoree Barrett, Director of Counseling Services at Bethany College, which recently implemented StepUp!. "They're also easily adaptable to different groups of students--athletes and non-athletes alike."

So far, Barrett has trained students in several campus groups, including resident assistants, and will train all the fall season team captains when they arrive back on campus. "Since I've been able to start using the materials with different groups, it's brought a general theme around campus of people being more involved in healthy decisions and healthy actions," she says. "It's made them think more. They say they now feel more prepared to step in and intervene."

"You can also follow up on the training," Bell says. "Meet with leadership groups or team captains to find out how this new knowledge is having an affect. Here at the University of Arizona, it's really become a campus-wide message. The more people hear the same message, the more it becomes a part of your campus culture."

For more information about StepUp!, visit: www.stepupprogram.org.

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