

Arizona stands out to...



By Michelle Brutlag Hosick

Former Arizona swimmer Ana Agy believes so much in her alma mater's Step Up program that she dedicated a large part of her senior year to making sure the program grew nationally.

She helped create a Step Up Day on the Tucson campus, and even now after her graduation she speaks out to support the intervention program designed to help people who witness risky behavior.

She even applied the Step Up philosophy to her own life.

"I used the skills that I learned from Step Up on several occasions in college, specifically a friend dealing with an abusive relationship, as well as academic-integrity situations," Agy said. "I was able to apply what I learned through Step Up in a way that made me feel comfortable with the decision I made while improving the specific situation."

The Step Up program was created by Arizona Associate Athletics Director Becky Bell, who in 2006 attended a presentation on bystander intervention in cases of sexual assault. Something clicked for her at that session – bystanders exist in most all of the "risky" behavioral situations: drinking, hazing, relationship abuse, eating disorders, depression, gambling and more. Could a bystander program work in those cases?

Bell set out to design one that would.

Two years later, she had a program that allows for interactive training sessions with students to get them thinking about ways they could help when they witness or learn about a potentially dangerous situation. She began training student-athletes, first about bystander intervention in general and then how it could apply to specific situations. Each training session can use "clicker" technology, which allows the student-athletes to give feedback anonymously through individual computer-sized devices.

Participants learn the five decision-making steps (notice the event, interpret the event as a problem/emergency, assume personal responsibility, know how to help and implement the help) and strategies for effective assistance. Presenters can find out (again, anonymously) what issues are most impor-



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tant to the specific group they are training and present scenarios specific to the group's needs. Participants learn how to help directly through immediate intervention and also how to help indirectly, such as with a phone call to a professional. The emphasis is on taking care of one another and building a bond within the athletics department.

The program can be applied in a variety of ways, and more than 75 groups have requested materials for their own use. Bell said the program is popular with campus health organizations and other nonprofit advocacy groups.

At Arizona, training is offered throughout the year, with some coaches making the

program mandatory for their student-athletes and others encouraging their teams to participate. The program is constantly updated and refined as new information, strategies and collateral material such as videos are discovered or developed.

Bell said getting buy-in from coaches and athletics directors was easy.

"What athletics director wouldn't want to avoid problems? What coach doesn't want to avoid a suspension or dismissal because of one of these issues?" she said. "We are creating a healthy and positive environment for student-athletes to have a great experience."

Step Up appeals to students because of the teamwork and empowerment philosophy – and because of the options it provides. Agy said educating students to solve problems without getting directly involved (and facing repercussions of some kind) is important.

"Realizing that as an individual you can make a difference is a powerful thing," Agy said. "If more people had that mind-set, there would be fewer problems and more people helping each other out."

Ironically, the most resistant student-athletes often end up being the ones who come back to Bell and her colleague Scott Goldman, the clinical psychologist in Arizona's athletics department, to report how they used the Step Up program in their lives.

For Goldman, just the knowledge that Step Up has helped in any way is enough.

"If one person avoids some kind of danger or damage, I'm pretty satisfied," Goldman said. "There will always be evil in the world. Doing something is better than doing nothing. I know we are making positive changes in people's lives."

For more information about Step Up, e-mail Becky Bell at bell@email.arizona.edu.