SAMs Say: A Health Promotion Campaign for Student-Athletes

Overview

The Student-Athlete Mentor (SAM) program began in 1989 through collaboration between the University of Virginia’s (UVa) Department of Athletics and Gordie Center for Substance Abuse Prevention (Gordie Center). Each athletic team must select at least two student-athletes to serve as SAMs - an internal health resource for the team. The SAM peer education group is the primary substance abuse education program in the Athletics Department and also promotes inter-team relations and coordinates community service activities.

To support these goals, the Gordie Center and Department of Athletics created SAMs Say: an evidence-informed health promotion campaign. The project was developed over five academic semesters by seven student-athletes enrolled in a credit-bearing internship course. Topics for the campaign are determined by the student-athlete interns using quantitative and qualitative research methods. Each poster personalizes the topic for student-athlete audiences by focusing on how the issue can impact athletic performance and team cohesion.

The campaign is a creative and engaging educational program to reduce alcohol abuse and promote healthy behaviors among UVa student-athletes. It is differentiated by the high level of student engagement in program creation and dissemination as well as the process of curriculum infusion.

In creating the health promotion campaign, the student-athlete interns used an iterative process to select health promotion topics relevant to their peers, research positive social norms and pertinent information on each topic, work with a student graphic designer to create 11” by 17” posters and test market the posters using qualitative and quantitative research methods. Process evaluation found that athletic team members found the campaign appealing, relevant and memorable.

Curriculum Infusion

The Practicum in Peer Alcohol Education course through the Carry School of Education is taught by student affairs faculty in the Gordie Center and is fully supported by the Division of Student Affairs and the Department of Athletics. The instructors have expertise in the social norms approach, behavior change theories and qualitative and quantitative research methods. Each student-athlete intern works an average of six hours per week to identify health promotion topics relevant to student-athletes, research pertinent facts (including positive norms) and design poster content. The student-athlete intern collaborates with the Gordie Center instructor to ensure the project is implemented according to the mutually-agreed upon process and timeline. The student-athlete intern collaborates with administrators and faculty in Athletics and other UVa offices to ensure poster content is accurate.

Student-athlete interns enrolled in the Practicum in Peer Alcohol Education course learn quantitative and qualitative research skills, assist their peers in making responsible decisions, engage as active citizens of the University community and formally reflect upon their successes and challenges to clarify their personal values and identity. Student Affairs faculty in the Gordie Center have taught the Practicum course since 2009.

Student-athletes enrolled in the course achieved significant learning outcomes including improved time and project management skills, research skills and self-confidence in their ability to find meaning after their athletic careers end.

Impact on Student-Athletes

Student-Athlete Population

The impact of SAMs Say is measured on the 700 student-athletes that see the posters almost daily in their team locker rooms and, more significantly, on the student-athlete interns who created the posters. Students report that the SAMs Say campaign creates a more health-enhancing environment for teams. As part of campaign development, student-athlete interns conducted intercept interviews to gauge student-athlete interest in this approach to health education. Among student-athletes who participated in the survey, 86% thought that the SAMs Say information was meaningful and 92% learned something new from the draft posters. In 2012, 57% of SAMs responded to a student-athlete intern survey to determine the most effective way to distribute posters and ideas for future topics. 93% of SAMs reported that the campaign was a valuable project that should continue.

SAMs also provided qualitative feedback on the program’s impact. One SAM commented that she:

"If you say that the SAMs Say posters because they’re aesthetically appealing and get the ideas and beliefs of SAMs across without seeming like they are preaching. A lot of the problems in talking to peers about things like substance abuse or really any of our topics is that it can seem like we’re attacking or talking down, but the posters tell what we want to say in a way that doesn’t put anyone on the defensive."

Impact on Student-Athletes

Student-Athlete Interns

Student-athletes enrolled in the Practicum in Peer Alcohol Education course reported significant learning outcomes including improved time and project management skills, quantitative and qualitative research skills and self-confidence in their ability to find meaning after their athletic careers end. They assisted their peers in making responsible decisions, engaged as active citizens of the University community and clarified their personal values and identity through a formal reflection process.

One intern wrote in her final reflection paper for the class that “this internship has prepared me to serve as a peer educator in many ways. It has opened my eyes to the realities of athletics in terms of health and wellness.” Other interns remarked that the course had an impact on future career paths by enhancing skills in “decision-making, communication, research, and facilitation skills.” Students felt that the project was a meaningful experience, “overall, I believe that this experience was something that I will remember forever... and really be proud of the work that I put into [the project]. I am so grateful and feel so lucky that I was given this opportunity.”