



## Overview of CU Boulder's Bystander Project

### 1. Why does our program focus on developing a helper identity rather than moving directly to an anti-violence or anti-discrimination framework?

- Research shows that lasting attitude and behavior change comes from interventions that allow people to maintain and enhance their existing self-concepts. We know students come here with a strong helper identity (84% strongly endorse the statement, "Helping is Like Me"). Since for the majority, their social justice and anti-oppression/anti-violence identity is not evolved to the same extent, the focus on a helper identity is more promising for moving students toward being more committed to helping and to taking action more often.
- Enhancing the helper identity works to override some of the more enduring pernicious attitudes related to social issues such as racism, misogyny, or homophobia. People don't need to have resolved all of their biases in order to recognize and interrupt harmful behaviors.

### 2. Why doesn't the bystander presentation specifically address high-level emergencies?

- We don't want to norm that CU is an unsafe place where people are doing all kinds of dangerous things that students will inevitably encounter.
- Students (and non-students!) don't have much experience with high-level helping situations, but people assume that they would respond appropriately. There are several reasons for this:
  - They haven't actually confronted a true emergency, so they don't have first-hand experience about how they would *actually* respond.
  - They're concerned about being judged, since it isn't socially appropriate to say that you don't know if you would do something about a rape or assault, or other awful event.
  - They want to believe that they *would* do something helpful in response to a high-level situation.
  - For these reasons, it's difficult to get students to think deeply about the reality of how they might respond, and to build skills for these situations.
- However, most people *do* have a wealth of experience with lower-level, and to some extent, mid-level situations. They have a better idea of what's



difficult or challenging in these contexts, and of what impedes them from taking action.

- It's easier to admit that you have failed in these kinds of situations, and people are more open to considering how they might change or improve in the future, and thus more open to working on new skills.
- The actual high-level events (alcohol poisoning, murder, rape, assault) are rare, but students are likely to encounter the precursors to these events on a frequent basis. Precursors, like someone leading a drunk person into a room, a drunk person being aggressively pursued at party or bar, or someone engaging in risk-taking behaviors (the kind that happen before someone falls out the window or off the roof) are common-place. These kinds of incidents serve as better (and more likely) entry points for taking action. Practice at this level prepares people for more serious events.

### **3. Why don't we tell people what to do (or not to do)?**

- Even though someone may agree with what you are telling them, if they perceive that you are asking them to change their behavior, their paradoxical response is often to act in the opposite direction. This response is called "Reactance," and it has the strong likelihood of sabotaging potential behavior change.
- We make a point of *not* lecturing them about the variety of helping situations people may encounter on campus, or the factors that may prevent them from helping. Instead, the presentation involves a purposefully-guided conversation that allows people to:
  - Imagine for themselves the kinds of situations (both the common and the exceptional) in which their help might be needed,
  - Enumerate the factors that may keep them from helping,
  - Discuss ways to overcome the barriers to helping, and
  - Generate do-able strategies for intervening that are a good fit for both them and the situation.
- This is part of an intentional process that allows them to hear what others think, and to access their own insights into the situations and barriers most relevant to them. We take this approach because research shows that people are more compelled by what they hear themselves say than by what others tell them.



#### **4. Is bystander really about prevention?**

- Bystander intervention training can be both primary and secondary prevention. It has the potential to interrupt harmful behavior (secondary), but it also provides a window for people to reflect on their own behavior (primary). It could be argued that the bystander approach is one of the only non-threatening contexts for people to reflect on their own behavior, particularly around high level issues; other approaches that confront the person directly about problematic behavior often make people too defensive to allow for self-reflection (Reactance, see above).
- Bystander training can also be a platform for community building. Looking out for each other and feeling that others will be there for you is implicit in the bystander framework and foundational to community building.

#### **5. What training do we provide to incoming students?**

- All incoming students to CU-Boulder receive a one-hour session on effective bystander intervention during Fall Welcome (week before school and two weeks into the semester).
- During this session, we introduce students to the concept of bystander intervention and provide a framework for seeing more possible entry points into situations where someone needs help. This includes generating a repertoire of strategies for intervening that fit for both the person offering help and the situation they are confronting. We also develop and practice communication skills for offering effective help. This includes fostering resiliency in the face of rejection and building stamina for staying engaged with the situation.

#### **6. What else is offered for the general student population?**

- The bystander program is a multi-session education and skill-building training in effective intervention skills. In partnership with other campus departments, we offer a menu of trainings for building effective intervene skills in a variety of situations. Booster sessions include:
  - Bystander skills in the classroom (discrimination and harassment)
  - Bystander skills for sexual assault prevention (intimate partner abuse included)
  - Bystander skills for graduate students (inside and outside of the classroom)
  - Bystander skills for all (workplace context, classroom context, ally development, and leadership development)