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Program Trains Students to Battle Stereotypes

(AP) ANNAPOLIS, Md. – Midshipmen Joy Dewey and Joshua Foxtan skip the usual military formality when they introduce themselves to a group of 40 new students at the U.S. Naval Academy.

They want to make them feel at ease, so they'll open up when the lesson on sexual harassment begins. Instead of Midshipman 1st Class, in Dewey's case, or Midshipman 2nd Class in Foxtan's, they introduce themselves by their first names.

Soon, Dewey and Foxtan say, they're asking the students to call out words they have either used or heard to describe promiscuous men and women. At a recent demonstration, two separate columns are quickly filled in on a blank, poster-sized piece of paper. Words like "stud," "stallion" and "player" fall on the men's side. More, and far less flattering, terms are listed for women. "Tramp" and "door knob" are among the less graphic.

The exercise kicks off what academy officials want – a frank discussion of how language can be used to intimidate and sexually objectify people. It's part of a new peer-training program at the Naval Academy to prevent sexual harassment, a high-profile problem at the school.

"It's doing our part to change a group of people – to change the overall culture that our society struggles with," Dewey said.

Dewey, who coordinates the group of 32 midshipmen who lead the Sexual Harassment and Assault Prevention Education program, said she believes the initiative is getting through to students.

"It's great when you do this in training, because people go: 'Whoa,'" Dewey said, describing moments students sometimes have during seminars. "You get a few of those where ... they just made the connection, and they're going to remember that connection – that just because you take these words lightly, the overall effect can be this."

The program was designed to cover a midshipman's four years at the academy and create a more structured approach to raising awareness about sexual misconduct. It began this summer with the incoming class of 2011. It will include a total of 25 hours of

training by the time they graduate.

The three older classes are studying sexual harassment prevention, but they are not getting the new peer-training sessions. Cmdr. Ricks Polk, the academy's sexual assault response coordinator, said school officials believed the program would be too difficult to implement right away to the entire 4,300-member student body.

The academy used a team of academic consultants to develop the initiative.

The program is not without its critics, however. Anita Sanchez, a spokeswoman for a victim advocacy group called the Miles Foundation that focuses on sexual assault in the military, said future officers need much more education to handle a difficult and prominent issue.

She described the 25 hours of training as "woefully inadequate."

"You're talking at least a good, at a minimum, 60 hours a year," Sanchez said. "I mean, that's what you're looking at if someone is a semiprofessional."

While the new program may demonstrate the academy is trying, Sanchez said much more needs to be done on what has been a troubling issue for years in the military.

"We're still moving down the field," Sanchez said. "We're not at the 50-yard line yet, even."

But Dewey, who recently attended a conference focusing on sexual assault, believes the military academy is doing more than most colleges to address a ubiquitous societal problem. She credits the program with creating a better climate for conveying the importance of the issue to midshipmen, making it clear that the academy won't put up with sexual harassment or inappropriate language that can instigate it.

"It's not tolerating it when someone says it on your sports team or you hear it passing in the hall or something," Dewey said. "It's just that element of up stepping up to break that bigger culture."

The academy is hoping the program will foster better communication with students about a difficult subject by having people of the same age who are going through similar experiences teach the program. The peer trainers recognize that students come to the academy from all over the nation and from backgrounds with differing social mores.

"We're trying to challenge those social norms and the culture behind it," said Midshipman Josef Miller, also a peer trainer.

Dewey, Miller and Foxtan recently sat down with reporters to talk about how the program is going and to demonstrate a lesson. Academy officials declined to let reporters sit in on an actual training session, saying students might not respond as openly with an audience.

The initiative focuses on explaining what constitutes rape and the psychological impacts of the crime. It also will include discussions about dating, consent, the role alcohol plays in relationships and the legal aspects of sexual assault.

Another strong component of the first year is teaching about the role bystanders play in stopping sexual assault. The program focuses on observations midshipmen should be aware of in social situations that may seem insignificant at first, but could develop into something serious.

Miller described the training as an effort to stress the importance of an issue the future naval officers may have to grapple with while in leadership roles.

“It’s not to say that the old training wasn’t effective,” Miller said. “It’s to say that we realize we need to go that extra step, we need to go that extra mile and really effect more positive change.”

For a program where the worst thing would be a silent audience, Foxtan said students mostly appear to be participating. Academy officials had prepared to prod along those who sat on their hands, but that’s been unnecessary.

“They’ve all been open,” Foxtan said of the groups he’s worked with. “They’ve all been discussing things.”

The academy has had a series of high-profile sexual misconduct cases over the past year. The school ended up expelling former football star Lamar Owens in April after he was acquitted of raping a fellow midshipman but convicted of conduct unbecoming an officer. Also in April, another former football player, Kenny Ray Morrison, was convicted of sexually assaulting a fellow midshipman.

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