New Service Program a Win-Win for Student-Athletes, Community

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The next time you walk the halls in McKale Memorial Center, don't be surprised if you spot a quarterback sitting at a table next to a track and field runner, as both focus intently on threading beads into colorful ornaments.

Community service is a priority for student-athletes, but it isn't always easy to fit volunteer activities into schedules that already weave practices, games, meets and tournaments around classes, exams, papers and presentations.

To make it easier for student-athletes to connect with local nonprofit organizations, the Drop-In Community Service program was created in August 2018. Now in its second year, the program is the brainchild of former student intern Nick Garner, who graduated from the UA last year with degrees in science and business marketing. Garner wanted to make community service more accessible for student-athletes, staff and the community.

"Our community supports our Wildcats so much by coming to our games and meets," says Natasha Harrison, assistant director for community relations, special events and the Jim Click Hall of Champions, who oversees the Drop-In Community Service program. "So we encourage our student-athletes and our staff to take every opportunity to give back."

James Francis, senior associate athletics director for external operations, adds: "With the demanding schedules of a student-athlete, we established this program to bring in volunteer opportunities so we can help make a difference here on campus."

"We reach out to various nonprofit organizations in the state to spend the day with us in McKale," Harrison says. "We advertise to our staff and student-athletes and encourage them to swing by during those times. The idea is to get people to drop in when they have a chance to do so, even if it is only for a few minutes."

By bringing nonprofits to campus, the program makes it possible to expose more student-athletes and staff members to more volunteering opportunities compared with more traditional models of community service. Less daunting than finding a chunk of time to set aside for volunteering, the drop-in schedule makes participation easier and more flexible. UA student-athletes can help advance a good cause without missing a workout or practice and make new acquaintances and connections in the process.

"As an athlete, it can be difficult find service opportunities that work with our crazy schedules," says UA track and field student-athlete Tatum Waggoner, who is the second year of her master's program in special education. "Drop-in services have allowed more of us athletes to easily be hands-on with local nonprofits."
The Drop-In Community Service program not only helps student-athletes connect with and build relationships with nonprofit community organizations but also allows them to explore potential careers. In addition, it strengthens the relationship between student-athletes and intercollegiate athletics employees, Harrison says.

"The shared activities bring together people who otherwise may not interact on a regular basis," she says.

"Student-athletes are not required to participate in any community service, including these drop-in opportunities," Francis says. "Since all of their time is volunteer-based, I think it makes their engagement even more impressive."

Each month during the academic year, a different organization will offer a volunteer opportunity. Past opportunities have included an American Red Cross blood drive; packaging beads for Beads of Courage, a nonprofit supporting seriously ill children; a UA Campus Pantry food drive; making blankets with Project Linus; and crafting Valentine greetings for hospitalized children.

Nonprofit organizations from around Arizona are invited to apply and learn more about how they might benefit from the program.

"The best opportunities are those that involve a hands-on activity or a drive," Harrison says. "We are open to any organization who can offer those types of opportunities."

For more information, contact Harrison at 520-621-0503 or naharris@arizona.edu

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