

# Physician Assistant Mistreatment During Training: Assessment and Intervention

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## Purpose:

Student mistreatment can result in reduced self-confidence and erosion of professionalism, but also seriously impact mental and physical wellbeing.<sup>1</sup> Data from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) Graduate Questionnaire revealed medical students experienced mistreatment at rates of 17% to 20% between 1999-2009.<sup>2,3</sup> In response, the AAMC focused efforts to reduce student mistreatment. Unfortunately, this goal is not easily accomplished.<sup>4,5</sup>

The MEDEX Northwest PA program at the University of Washington had reports of student mistreatment and sought to assess the prevalence of these behaviors occurring during clinical and didactic training. Two years data are reported to examine whether specific corrective actions resulted in the reduction of reported mistreatment.

## Methods:

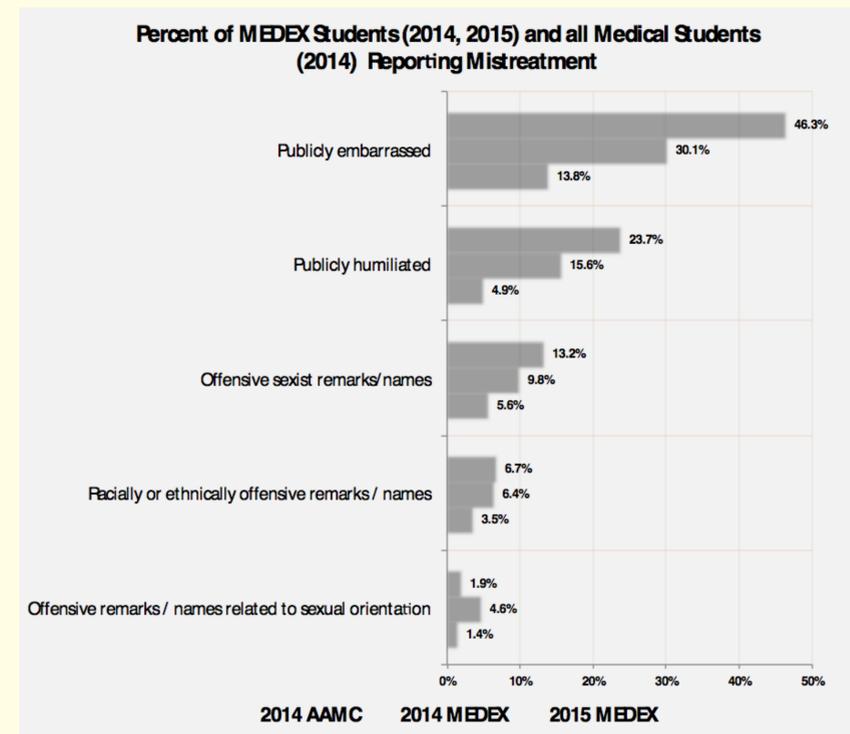
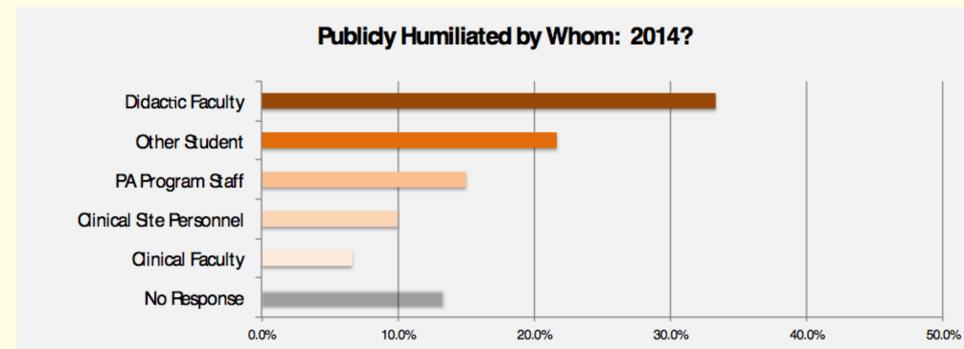
UW's PA program received permission from the AAMC to modify its current Graduate Survey to represent physician assistant trainee experiences. The survey included reports of mistreatment including public embarrassment, public humiliation, denial of opportunities, threats or experience of physical harm, and sexual abuse. The modified survey was administered to all didactic and clinical year students in 2014 and again in 2015.

## Results:

Response rates were respectively 72.0% and 59.2% for the 2014 and 2015 administrations. In 2014, 30.1% of students reported at least one instance of public embarrassment and 15.6% reported public humiliation. In 2015, following administrative corrective actions, student reports of public embarrassment dropped -16.3% and reports of public humiliation dropped -10.7% (both  $p < 0.05$ ). Our program's students reported significantly fewer incidents than medical students for experiencing public embarrassment (46.3%) or public humiliation (23.7%)<sup>5</sup> (both  $p < 0.05$ ). Qualitative findings revealed declines between the two annual survey administrations for statements suggesting distrust, allegations of serious abuse, fears of retaliation, or frustration with leadership's response to problems.

## Discussion:

The significant reduction in reported embarrassment and humiliation correspond with corrective actions taken by the PA program. Surveying students regarding instances of mistreatment is now an integrated component of annual evaluation efforts. We encourage other programs to adopt similar assessments.



## Emerging Themes

Students were asked, "If you were subjected to negative or offensive behavior(s) NOT described above, please describe the behavior(s)." The following themes emerged.

- Public humiliation from faculty and fellow students (most common report).
- Faculty fosters an atmosphere of religious and political intolerance.
- Bullying by fellow students.
- Faculty acted in a condescending manner towards students.
- Sexist comments made by clinical rotation site personnel.
- Appreciation that the survey allowed confidential means to report concerns.
- Discrimination based on disability status (single report).

## Program Actions

Following the 2014 survey, our program took the following summarized actions

- Personnel changes and faculty education.
- Program leadership plans to conduct this survey annually as a surveillance tool to uncover student mistreatment during training.

## Conclusions

Corrective actions, especially personnel changes and faculty education appeared to resolve the most pressing complaints.

## References

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