



A Statement of Commitment to Zero Tolerance of Harassment and Discrimination in Schools and Programs of Public Health

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Abstract

The Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health convened a Task Force on Zero Tolerance of Harassment and Discrimination in 2019 to develop a policy statement and strategies for addressing harassment of all types in institutions offering public health education. We outline the premises and scholarly foundation for the development of the Statement of Commitment to Zero Tolerance of Harassment and Discrimination, the statement itself, and future plans for realizing the aspiration established in the statement. The development of this living document is predicated on the belief that it is the core responsibility of academic institutions to build the knowledge and that it is the responsibility of leaders, namely deans of schools of public health and directors of public health programs, to lead in building the shared knowledge and insist on the practices that create institutions for a better future free of harassment and discrimination. Our statement is informed by the knowledge that aggressions in the form of harassment and discrimination undermine the health and well-being of individuals, the public, and populations.

Keywords

harassment, discrimination, education, leadership, universities

In 2019, the Association of Schools and Programs of Public Health (ASPPH) Board of Directors convened a task force charged with developing a statement of commitment to zero tolerance of sexual harassment and discrimination and proposing recommendations for further actions that ASPPH might take. The 9 Task Force on Zero Tolerance of Harassment and Discrimination (hereinafter, Task Force) members, who are recognized experts in their respective fields of public health, held various leadership positions at ASPPH-member schools and programs of public health.

The statement was developed through an iterative process with various ASPPH constituencies, including members of the board of directors, academic leaders from schools and programs of public health, members of the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee, and members attending the 2019 annual ASPPH conference. A series of structured discussions and seminars were held in 2019 to empower school

and program members with the most recent empirical knowledge about matters of harassment and discrimination, to enable all to speak openly about this matter, and to ensure that all voices were heard. These seminars and discussions helped shape and direct the work of the Task Force to develop the statement.

ASPPH directed the Task Force to develop a statement of commitment to zero tolerance for discrimination and harassment to be ratified by all ASPPH-member schools and programs of public health. The Task Force undertook numerous

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activities to enact this work, including (1) data collection on published materials and the extant literature; (2) consideration and analysis of ideas that emerged from 2018 ASPPH meetings (annual meeting, sections meeting, leadership retreat) with leadership groups, faculty, and staff members that led to the development of the Task Force; and (3) consideration of initiatives related to sexual harassment being undertaken by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine¹ and universities with schools and programs of public health. The Task Force met through monthly teleconferences from October 2018 through March 2019 and undertook drafting and editing between meetings.

After the statement was drafted, a series of feedback discussions were held with the ASPPH Board of Directors, the Diversity and Inclusion Committee, and the Diversity and Inclusion Section. The Task Force garnered detailed feedback; in response, the Task Force addressed feedback and modified the document accordingly. The response and the revised document were presented to the board of directors, leading to approval of the final statement in May 2019. Inherent in all discussions were the core responsibility of academic institutions to build the knowledge; that leadership sets the stage for a better future; that it is the responsibility of leaders, namely deans of schools of public health and directors of public health programs, to lead in building the shared knowledge and insist on the practices that create institutions for a better future free of harassment and discrimination; and that leaders have to take responsibility for identifying and solving structural inequalities while also holding all responsible to be part of building a culture for a better future.

Premises

The Task Force undertook its work guided by a set of beliefs about issues of harassment and discrimination as follows:

1. Issues of harassment and discrimination continue to resurface because they are being treated like topics and not ways of life.
2. Harassment is rooted in discrimination; thus, we must commit to zero tolerance for discrimination.
3. Harassment is shaped by culture and identity.
4. Voices cannot be silenced out of fear of environmental discomfort if we are to effectively address harassment in our schools and programs.
5. Harassment is not confined to actions of male-identified persons on female-identified persons; thus, efforts must be all-encompassing.
6. Harassment and discrimination undermine individual and population health.

The Statement

ASPPH and our member schools and programs are committed to eliminating harassment and discrimination in academic public health. It is essential to provide all our students, staff, faculty, and community partners with respectful and safe learning and working environments. We oppose acts of harassment and discrimination in all forms, while we simultaneously work toward developing schools and programs that are directed by cultural competence and humility, inclusivity, and diversity.

There should be zero tolerance for acts of harassment or discrimination in academic public health. As we aspire to apply this zero-tolerance mandate, we envision that the cultures of all of our schools and programs will be free of any forms of harassment and discrimination.

Points of Understanding

ASPPH and our member organizations acknowledge that harassment and discrimination exist in academic medicine,² nursing,³ and science and engineering,⁴ as well as in many other branches of academia,⁵ including academic public health. We affirm that the consequences of harassment and discrimination can include decreased performance by individuals, within organizations, and throughout society as a whole.^{6,7}

We are concerned about the broad spectrum of harassing and discriminatory behavior. Rape and sexual assault reflect the criminal side of this spectrum; the physical and psychic violence experienced by survivors of these acts is most often horrific. We are also concerned about the other side of the spectrum, which includes all forms of harassment and

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discrimination that do not rise to the levels of criminal violence or civil rights violations (eg, microaggression, belittling, berating, and bullying).^{8,9} These behaviors are also detrimental to the mental health of victims and to the cultures of communities and organizations. Furthermore, if not opposed, this type of conduct can lead to an impression that even more toxic forms of behavior may be tolerated.

ASPPH and our member organizations also acknowledge that harassment and discrimination have not been confined only to inappropriate actions taken by male-identified cisgender persons against female-identified transgender persons.¹⁰ We believe that harassment and discrimination may be understood as actions taken by those who abuse their power and privilege in settings that permit intolerant and unethical behavior.¹¹

Universities are among the oldest institutions in human history that have been devoted to understanding and improving the human condition, by promoting student scholarship and engagement with society. As such, universities have a special obligation to address conditions that threaten to erode their values and missions and to negatively affect their climates and cultures. To paraphrase American psychologist Carl Rogers, human beings are driven to activate and express all of their capacities. If so, each person should have the right, particularly within our institutions of higher learning, to pursue those capacities in climates and cultures that are free of harassment and discrimination.

ASPPH and our member organizations affirm our obligation and commitment to eliminating harassment and discrimination within the public health academy, just as our colleagues have done in medicine and other fields.^{12,13} Academic public health should not be left behind in this important work.¹⁴

A Public Health Approach

As a group of public health professionals, ASPPH and its member organizations will be directed in our efforts by the tenets of public health: human rights, social justice, and health equity. We will take proactive steps to prevent harassment and discrimination from occurring in the first place. We will actively seek to understand the characteristics of our institutions and to address the power differentials that can enable harassing and discriminatory behavior within our organizations. We will work to change our cultures and systems to stop harassment and discrimination. We will focus efforts on developing institutional climates that foster inclusion for all persons.

Through ASPPH's Diversity and Inclusion Committee and Diversity and Inclusion Section, we can enable our members to (1) share best practices developed and implemented successfully at their own institutions; (2) develop new strategies for addressing harassment and discrimination, as new knowledge becomes available and our understandings evolve; (3) determine how best to implement new

approaches within their own organizations; and (4) empower organizational leaders by providing the tools needed to pursue approaches that are consistent with federal and local laws, as well as university bylaws and policies.

We envision the ongoing development of strategies that combat harassment and discrimination and become embedded in organizational cultures. We will encourage each member institution to enact zero-tolerance approaches that align with their respective federal and local laws and university policies. We expect that these approaches will change as laws, policies, and evidence evolve. Moreover, we anticipate that this Statement of Commitment to Zero Tolerance of Harassment and Discrimination will also evolve and change over time.

Recognizing that efforts to prevent and reduce sexual harassment and violence require a long-term process of culture change, ASPPH is committed to providing training to organizational leaders, faculty, and staff. The Diversity and Inclusion Committee and the Diversity and Inclusion Section will make recommendations to ASPPH members about appropriate training topics and instruments. We envision that this document will be analyzed and discussed throughout all segments of ASPPH and our member organizations. It is our intent that this process will allow leaders in the academic, research, and practice segments of public health to apply the document in ways that are most appropriate for their professional disciplines.

Proposed Tenets for Developing Zero-Tolerance Strategies

We propose 5 tenets with supporting action items that can be used by organizations to develop zero-tolerance strategies toward harassment and discrimination.

Antiharassment and Antidiscrimination Policies and Trainings

- Develop policies on harassment and discrimination, as many institutions have already enacted.¹⁵⁻¹⁷
- Develop trainings that educate the academic community on current harassment and discrimination policies and procedures.
- Create trainings aimed at changing inappropriate behaviors, challenging biased norms and beliefs, and promoting respect and civility.
- Foster climates in which trainings are taken seriously and in which expectations for faculty, staff, and student participation and engagement are explicitly communicated.
- Identify, examine, and address policies, processes, and practices that have undermined institutional responsibility and accountability for addressing misconduct

and for promoting a culture that fosters aspirational achievement.

- Periodically update and publish information about institutional policies and trainings, to keep them in sync with the evolution of social conditions and to be sure they reach all faculty, students, and staff, considering the turnover that can occur in these populations.

Identifying and Reporting Harassment and Discrimination

- Train persons to recognize harassment and discrimination.
- Promote bystander intervention in the event of any witnessed harassment or discrimination.
- Encourage and facilitate reporting by those who are subjected to harassment and discrimination, as well as by those who witness such acts.
- Empower persons to report acts of harassment and discrimination in real time.
- Provide safe ways, including with the use of technology, to report harassment and discrimination.
- Create a culture of accountability so that acts of harassment and discrimination do not go unpunished.

Protecting Victims of Harassment and Discrimination

- Provide support, including resiliency training, for persons who are targets of harassment and discrimination.
- Follow institutional and legal policies and procedures when charges of harassment are made.
- Adopt mentoring networks that include peers and senior faculty to diffuse the hierarchical relationships between faculty and students that lead to power differentials.
- Create a system of accountability so that persons who harass and discriminate are not protected.
- Foster an environment in which it is safe to pursue difficult conversations without fear of retaliation.

Communicating and Transparency

- State clearly and follow closely legal procedures that are in place to protect due process.
- Inform communities that persons will be held accountable for violating harassment and discrimination policies and procedures.
- Be as transparent as possible about how reports of sexual harassment are handled.

Shifting the Culture

- Create systems to integrate values that emphasize diversity and respect.
- Commit to changes in the power dynamics at academic institutions.
- Address institutional norms that have been shaped by centuries of power and privilege held by a select few.
- Improve transparency and accountability.
- Create a pipeline of leaders who reflect the diversity of our society.
- Demonstrate zero tolerance for the use of words that are demeaning or disparaging or that seek to silence.

Implications

The ideas outlined in the Statement of Commitment to Zero Tolerance for Harassment and Discrimination adopted by ASPPH and its constituent organizations will be manifested and realized through a set of initiatives. First, we will enact ongoing efforts for training, program development, and discussions at retreats and conferences. As evidenced by the development and adoption of the statement of commitment to eliminating harassment of any type in academic public health, ASPPH plans to implement a multipronged approach that includes training of staff and members to prevent harassment and to intervene when appropriate, developing policies that state ASPPH's position on harassment and discrimination, and collecting and disseminating resources that can be used by ASPPH-member schools and programs of public health as a primer on the issues and promising practices implemented within institutions.

Second, we will enable active sharing of best practices across institutions. The Task Force is working with the ASPPH Diversity and Inclusion Committee and Diversity and Inclusion Section to ensure that we serve the leadership, faculty, staff, and students of member schools and programs of public health by setting up mechanisms to share promising practices and proven strategies to achieve inclusion and ensure equity in public health education. One mechanism is the establishment of online communities to share information on strategic initiatives.

Third, we will consider and develop other strategies. The Task Force advocated for challenging the status quo and leading changes to achieve zero tolerance. The call is for schools and programs of public health to lead the way at their universities and colleges to implement proactive strategies and actions that will make a difference in higher education, research, and service.

In the end, the discipline of public health, as led by ASPPH and its constituent organizations, intends to lead the way on matters of harassment and discrimination. We will be vigilant in our efforts until such time as our society is free from harassment and discrimination. This aspiration is the centerpiece of the statement we have proudly forged.

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