


Assessing the Health of the Learning Environment: Learning Environment Action Plans

Office of Student Affairs

The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University

March 1, 2022



Foreword

One of our most esteemed Alpert Medical School deans, Dr. Joe Diaz, can frequently be heard saying, “the learning environment *is* the patient environment.” I will add to Dean Diaz’ point and argue that among the most concerning features of *unhealthy* learning environments include mistreatment and microaggressions directed at students. These unhealthy behaviors affect patients.

Imagine, for example, a learning environment marked by frequent public humiliation and condescension towards trainees. How might learners feel about asking for help from senior members of the team in the event a patient’s condition is deteriorating? How might this affect the patient’s care? By focusing on improving the environment for our learners, we improve the conditions in which our patients heal.

Beyond the argument that the environments of learners and patients are unified, we know student mistreatment and microaggressions are associated with a range of disturbing outcomes: depression, suicidal thoughts, PTSD, burnout, substance use, decreased self-confidence, regret for choosing medicine as a career, increasing thoughts of leaving medical school, and decreased career satisfaction.

Work intended to improve the learning environment may have the unintended impact of leading some members of the community to feel unvalued, unappreciated or unfairly criticized. Unequivocally, our faculty and departments are full of thoughtful, compassionate and dynamic educators. Since 2017, over 1,000 faculty members have been nominated by students as Positive Champions of the Learning Environment compared to ~180 reports of mistreatment. We *celebrate* our faculty even as we work to identify ways for us to continue to grow as an institution.

As individuals and departments committed to improving the care and health of the people of Rhode Island (and beyond), thank you for your efforts to review and improve the health of our learning environment. Your support will help continue to improve our healthcare system as a whole.

Rory Merritt, MD MEHP

Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Learning Environment

Introduction to the Program for a Healthy Learning Environment

Given the complexities of the current healthcare environment some may wonder: why focus on developing a *Program for a Healthy Learning Environment* now? Most importantly, it's the right thing to do. Our students deserve to learn to become physicians in an environment free of mistreatment and microaggressions. In addition, proactively supporting healthy learning environments within medical schools is a requirement of accrediting bodies such as the Liaison Committee for Medical Education (LCME) of the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC).

At an institutional level, the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University (AMS) has redoubled its existing commitment to promoting healthy learning environments after the LCME, during the recent AMS re-accreditation process, found AMS “unsatisfactory” with respect to student mistreatment. Based on survey data from the AAMC Graduate Questionnaire, the LCME noted disparate mistreatment rates at AMS compared to other medical schools (45% vs 36.9%) and above average mistreatment in categories related to gender, race and ethnicity. In response, AMS has hired an inaugural Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Learning Environment to help lead efforts to improve the learning environment, become in compliance with LCME guidelines and respond to and work to prevent student mistreatment and progression.

A cornerstone of the *Program for a Healthy Learning Environment* is the implementation of Learning Environment Action Plans (LEAPs). Modeled after Diversity and Inclusion Action Plans, LEAPs allow for individual departments to reflect on their current learning environment, collect data related to it and synthesize areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Information collected through LEAPs will be used to identify and drive institutional initiatives, uncover opportunities to better support departments and increase transparency and accountability needed to drive positive change.

Key Terms:

- Learners: Within the context of this document, learners are understood to be students.
- Learning Environment: The learning environment refers to any space students are expected to be able to learn: at the medical school within the context of lectures and small groups, at hospital sites, clinics, community partners and now, virtual spaces.
- Learning Environment Survey: This is a confidential survey which allows learners to report concerns related to mistreatment or microaggressions in a confidential or anonymous fashion. Reports are reviewed and acted upon by the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Learning Environment and the Associate Dean of Student Affairs.
- Healthy Learning Environment: At a minimum, a healthy learning environment is one free of learner mistreatment and microaggressions. Others have defined a healthy learning environment as one that “prepare[s], supports[s], and inspire[s] everyone involved in health professions, education and health care to work toward optimal health of individuals, populations and communities” (van Schaik et al. p. 976).
- Mistreatment: is perhaps the sine qua non of an unhealthy learning environment. From the perspective of the American Association of Medical Colleges (AAMC), mistreatment includes specific behaviors outlined in Table 1. The Warren Alpert Medical School further defines mistreatment as any behavior that is harmful or offensive to an individual student and interferes with the student’s learning. This may include:
 - Public embarrassment or humiliation
 - Threat of or actual physical harm
 - Sexual harassment or assault
 - Discrimination or harassment based on race, color, religion, national or ethnic origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, age, or status as a veteran
 - Psychological punishment
 - Use of grading and other forms of assessment in a punitive, harassing, or discriminatory manner

- Microaggressions: "...are brief, commonplace slights/insults that can be verbal, behavioral or environmental. They are often automatic and unintentional and trigger a sense of subordination based on a social identity (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disability). Microaggressions typically perpetuate a worldview of White supremacy and superiority. They can be overt (using racist language to refer to a racialized group) or implicit (being surprised by someone's career ambitions or academic success). Microaggressions can impact student well-being and lead to worse health outcomes."

Table 1. AAMC Graduation Questionnaire: Who can mistreat and which behaviors are considered mistreatment?	
According to the AAMC, who can mistreat a learner?	Faculty, nurses, residents/interns, other institution employees or staff and other students Patient behaviors are not counted
The following behaviors are considered mistreatment by the AAMC:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Been publicly embarrassed 2. Been publicly humiliated 3. Been threatened with physical harm 4. Been physically harmed 5. Required to perform personal services 6. Been subjected to unwanted sexual advances 7. Been asked to exchange sexual favors for grades or other rewards 8. Received lower evaluations or grades solely because of gender rather than performance 9. Received lower evaluations or grades solely because of race or ethnicity rather than performance 10. Received lower evaluations or grades solely because of sexual orientation rather than performance 11. Been subjected to offensive sexist remarks/names? 12. Been subjected to racially or ethnically offensive remarks/names 13. Been subjected to offensive remarks/names related to sexual orientation 14. Been denied opportunities for training or rewards based on gender 15. Been denied opportunities for training or rewards based on race or ethnicity 16. Been denied opportunities for training or rewards based on sexual orientation 17. Been subjected to negative or offensive behavior(s) based on your personal beliefs or personal characteristics other than your gender, race/ethnicity, or sexual orientation?

Assessing the Learning Environment at the Departmental Level

Learning Environment Action Plans

Over the next three months, please provide the following information within the Learning Environment Action Plan, modeled below. The goal is for each Department to provide an accurate appraisal of its current/existing state related to the learning environment and use that information to generate actionable goals and plans for the future. Please provide supporting information whenever possible to support your LEAP. After submission, LEAPs will be reviewed by the Committee for the Learning Environment using the rubric below.

Learning Environment Action Plan

Name of Department:

LEAP Coordinator:

Date Submitted:

1. Please describe the process your department uses to ensure learners can train to become physicians in a healthy learning environment, free of mistreatment and/or microaggressions. If you do not have any processes currently in place, please state so.
2. Please describe initiatives or programming for resident, fellow and faculty development for promoting healthy learning environments and preventing student mistreatment and microaggressions.
3. Recognizing that several types of mistreatment and/or microaggressions occur disproportionately more than others, please elaborate on any policies, procedures, programming, initiatives or activities focused on the following subcategories of mistreatment and/or microaggressions (refer to Table 1):
 - a. Race/ethnicity-based
 - b. Gender-based
 - c. Public embarrassment or humiliation
4. How does your Department assess the health of its learning environment for learners?

5. What Departmental policies and procedures are in place for responding to environment concerns, such as mistreatment or microaggressions, by a faculty member, fellow or resident?
6. What are your department's strengths related to ensuring a healthy learning environment?
7. What are your department's opportunities to improve?
8. Based on the review of the learning environment, what are the Department's goals and objectives for promoting a healthy learning environment over the next year? At least one goal and objective should pertain to minimizing and eliminating mistreatment and/or microaggressions.
9. What support would be helpful to the Department to achieve its goals and objectives?

Using LEAP Data to Improve the Learning Environment

1. Each Department will be asked to appoint a LEAP Coordinator with primary responsibility for compiling the LEAP, overseen by the Department Chair and if applicable, Department Vice Chair for Education. The LEAP Coordinator can be an existing member of the Committee on the Learning Environment (COLE).
2. Submitted Departmental LEAPs will be reviewed by all members of the COLE. After review, there will be an interim period for written comments or questions to be addressed by individual departments through their respective LEAP Coordinators.
3. Finalized LEAPs will be assessed using a rubric by all members of COLE. Average scores for each domain will be tabulated.
4. In the interest of transparency and accountability, elements of LEAPs and their rubrics will be made available to the AMS community.
5. Based on the information contained in the LEAPs, with guidance from COLE, the Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Learning Environment will compile an executive summary with recommendations for institutional priorities related to improving the learning environment.
6. In subsequent years, annual LEAP Progress Reports will be used to demonstrate continued progress towards departmental and institutional goals.

Rubric for LEAP Evaluation

	Needs Attention (1)	Meets Expectations (2)	Exceptional (3)
Assessing the learning environment	There are no clear processes or there are planned processes in place for evaluated the health of the learning environment	The Department has a process for evaluating the health of its learning environment	The Department has a rigorous process for evaluating the health of its learning environment that is implemented on a regular basis
Proactive programming	There are minimal opportunities available for Department members to learn best practices for promoting a healthy learning environment	The Department offers, promotes or provides funding for members to promote a healthy learning environment	The Department offers, promotes or provides funding for ample opportunities for members to promote a healthy learning environment, including preventing and/or responding to student mistreatment and microaggressions
Responding to mistreatment and microaggressions	The Department responds to mistreatment and microaggressions of learners but has not yet articulated protocols and/or procedures for doing so	The Department has a protocol and/or procedures in place for responding to learner mistreatment and/or microaggressions	The Department has clear protocols and/or procedures in place for responding to learner mistreatment and/or microaggressions. Learner mistreatment/microaggressions are included in annual reviews of faculty, fellows and residents. Members who have been identified as mistreated/microaggressed learners complete a performance improvement plan or similar activity.
Strengths	The Department has identified strengths	The Department has identified its strengths with respect to the learning environment and	The Department has thoughtfully reflected on its strengths with respect to the learning

		provided a justification for them	environment, provided an ample justification for its strengths and considered how strengths might be a model for other Departments
Areas of improvement	The Department has identified areas for improvement	The Department has identified areas for improvement and provided initial thoughts on how to make said improvements	The Department has thoughtfully reflected on areas for improvement and provided detailed plans for making said improvements
Goals and objectives	The Department has listed goals and/or objectives related to the learning environment; does not include any goals and/or objectives related to mistreatment or microaggressions	The Department has listed goals and/or objectives related to the learning environment, including at least one goal and/or objective that pertains to learner mistreatment and/or microaggressions	The Department has specific, measurable goals and/or objectives related to the learning environment, including one or more that pertain to mistreatment and/or microaggressions. The Department goals and/or objectives are attentive to learners who have one or more intersectional, marginalized or minoritized identities.