Bystander to Upstander Policy at Dental Schools

Background: In 2018, the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) reported that more than 58% of female staff and faculty in academia are subjected to sexual harassment. In addition, 20-50% of female students report sexual harassment or assault. NASEM reports that the STEM careers of females are in jeopardy, because those that complain of sexual harassment are bullied, retaliated against, and consequently forced out of their careers and their institutions. Essentially, this results in a national loss of STEM talent, research and overall workforce, creating a public health crisis.

In 2019, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) recognized the pervasive and serious detriment surrounding researchers that complain about sexual harassment. The NIH requires “transparency, accountability, integrity, equity, and justice in the research environment.” To support victims of sexual harassment NIH has vowed that any funded institutions not following Title IX and Title VII, or NIH ruling, will have their awarded research monies revoked. NASEM and NIH suggest adoption of cultural changes and inclusion of respect to possibly curb academic abuse.

One issue that requires focus and change is the “bystander” problem. A bystander is a person that witnesses academic abuse, bullying, retaliation, or sexual harassment yet does not intervene to assist the victim or situation. The theories of why people fail to assist while witnessing abuse include: 1) the shock of not knowing how to act, 2) the fear of retaliation, 3) the more people that witness the issue the less the bystander will come forward.

Intervention of bystanders, called “upstanding”, is often considered the only reason that bullying, and sexual harassment crimes will cease. Awareness and explicit training on university campuses will encourage faculty and students to speak up when witnessing an act of bullying, sexual harassment, or assault. It is imperative that leadership recognizes and rewards upstanders, rather than punish/retaliate against them.

Resolution:

Resolved that ADEA follow the foundations National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine and the National Institutes of Health, the American Dental Education Association must support efforts and strategies, ensuring that progress is being made to curb sexual harassment, bullying and retaliation. To do this, ADEA should embrace cultural change, similar to NASEM and NIH.

ADEA can change culture by endorsing #Upstanders, encouraging schools to support and assist those that have been abused. ADEA should encourage schools to reward and not retaliate against upstanders. We all must take part in a moral obligation to end the culture of sexual harassment in higher education and biomedical research.