Boston University School of Public Health

Bystander Intervention Training Evaluation

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Executive Summary

The Activist Lab at the Boston University School of Public Health is a center for education, innovation, and advocacy aimed to bring public health goals beyond the walls of the academic and research institution. In Fall 2018, the Activist Lab in collaboration with the Epidemiology Department and Graduate Student Life, embarked on an effort to equip the incoming students at BUSPH with practical techniques for addressing public harassment.

Public harassment incidents are common and can have lasting health impacts for people and communities. Harassment happens in many forms, often targeting people based on perceived identities such as race, gender, or religion.[1] Verbal harassments are the most common form of public harassment.[2] We are concerned and aware of the need to address incidents of harassment both within the BU School of Public Health, and in the larger communities where our students, staff, faculty, and contractors live.

In collaboration with Hollaback!, a nonprofit organization located in New York City, we created a 2.5 hour training session to teach BU School of Public Health students techniques for responding to incidents of public harassment. The trainings involved reflective and collaborative methods to teach procedures that anyone can use to identify and de-escalate incidents of public harassment. In September 2018, 320 BUSPH Master's students participated in these trainings.

The theory behind training people on how to respond to public harassment is based on research indicating that people who go through trainings are more likely to intervene.[3] In essence, those who are trained are faster at recognizing a situation before it escalates, and have the tools and techniques for thoughtfully and effectively responding in ways that provide support for the person being harassed.

The following report brings together voices of the students who participated in these trainings. Pre-and post-evaluations of the training provided feedback for improving these BUSPH trainings going forward, as well as encouraging words highlighting the importance and unique nature of these workshops in the BUSPH curriculum.

Overall, there was agreement that the training was comprehensive, useful, and engaging. People reported feeling more confident in their ability to intervene when they see public harassment. From the qualitative summaries, participants reported that this was a unique addition to the BUSPH curriculum due to the structure of this session, which was interactive and rooted in sharing personal stories. The quality of the training was also highly rated, 98.7% percent of participants said they would recommend this training to others.

Future improvements to these trainings will incorporate more practice using the techniques and providing opportunities for participants to act out the skills they learned during the training sessions. We are in the process of piloting these changes in community trainings throughout the Boston area, in addition to expanding the training team to involve students in future trainings at BUSPH.

Acknowledgements

Background

Verbal harassment is the most common form of public harassment.[2] Two out of every three women and one in four men in the U.S. report experiencing public harassment in their lifetime.[2] The Southern Poverty Law Center reported 437 hateful intimidation and harassment reports in a single week after the election of 45th President of the United States.[4] Thirty-one percent of these reports involved anti-immigrant incidents.[4]

In Boston, incidents of public harassment are common. The Huffington Post recently reported on a woman's experience of harassment in the neighborhood where she grew up in Boston. From a young age, she described feeling intimidated and small as a direct result of experiencing harassment while walking in Boston.[5] WBUR news reported an incident in 2017 where someone shouted racial slurs in public. The author of the article described a sense of shock and feeling caught off-guard, which prevented them from intervening: "I was caught off guard, but that's not a sufficient excuse either."[6] Feeling caught off guard or unsure of how to intervene appropriately in situations of public harassment is a common response. However, research suggests that when people learn techniques for intervening they are less likely to be caught off guard when they see public harassment, and are more likely to respond.[3]

Stories from members of the BUSPH community during seminars and community forums highlighted the impact public harassment has on students, staff, and faculty of the school. As a result, we contacted Hollaback! a non-profit organization that has been training people on how to intervene in situations of public harassment since 2010, to inquire about collaboration opportunities to develop a training for BUSPH community members. After months of collaboration with Hollaback and hosting workshops to tailor the training materials for BUSPH, the trainings were integrated into the Fall 2018 Leadership and Management courses.

The training teaches techniques of intervention (distract, delegate, delay, document, direct, decompress) with a central focus on remaining safe and understanding how to effectively support the person being harassed while drawing the focus away from the harasser. Members of the training committee recognize that intervening in incidents of public harassment is challenging and at-times risky, therefore everyone is reminded to evaluate personal safety before engaging. The results from the evaluations of the six trainings are discussed below.

Methods

The nonprofit organization Hollaback located in New York City provided the initial training materials. The trainers attended a three-hour train-the-trainer session from Hollaback! in order to learn how to conduct these trainings. A working group of staff and faculty who attended the train-the-trainer session participated in working sessions to adapt the training materials to fit the BUSPH community interests and needs. Three pilot trainings were conducted prior to Fall 2018 both within the School of Public Health and in locations in the greater Boston area. Feedback from these pilot trainings was incorporated prior to hosting the Fall 2018 sessions at BUSPH.
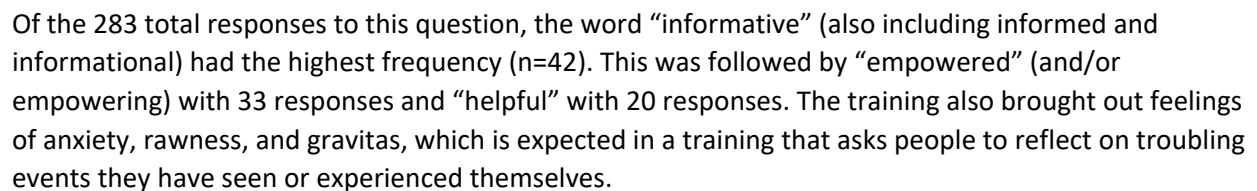
The trainings were conducted in the Leadership and Management courses, a required core class for all Master of Public Health (MPH) students. Each training had two facilitators and lasted about 2.5-3 hours depending on the size of the class. The following persons conducted the trainings: Mahogany Price, Elizabeth Henehan, Craig Ross and Greg Cohen.

The trainings were evaluated using anonymous self-report pen and paper surveys. Surveys were distributed as students entered the classroom. Five evaluation metrics were completed prior to and immediately following the training to assess changes in knowledge of public harassment, knowledge of the Hollaback organization, and confidence in intervening. We compared the mean score of each question comparing the pre and post responses using paired t-tests. Participants responded to six additional evaluation questions following the training, which included both numeric scale responses and free-response questions. On a five-point scale participants rated how comprehensive the introduction of the training was, whether the information provided was useful, whether the activities were engaging, whether the facilitators were prepared and engaging, and, overall quality of the training. Participants also evaluated the training using five open-ended questions: what was the best thing about the workshop?; what questions are still unanswered after completing the workshop/what additional exercises would you like to discuss?; and general comments/suggestions for improvements. One question assessed whether participants would recommend the training (yes/no), and participants were asked to report one single word that described their responses to the training. A total of 320 anonymous surveys were compiled and analyzed together.

Three coders entered the data from the evaluations into Excel and used R to conduct the paired t-tests. Qualitative summaries were organized into subcategories and major themes from these summaries are reported.

Lastly, prior to each training, participants were asked to imagine a world without public harassment. What would be different for your community, family and friends, and what would be different for you? Participants responded to these questions on flip charts before starting the training. Summaries of these responses were categorized and summarized.

Word Cloud of Single-Word Feeling about the Workshop

Figure 1. Word cloud depicting the responses to the assessment question "Please say one word that describes your feelings about the workshop." Size of word is relative to frequency of response.

Of the 283 total responses to this question, the word "informative" (also including informed and informational) had the highest frequency (n=42). This was followed by "empowered" (and/or empowering) with 33 responses and "helpful" with 20 responses. The training also brought out feelings of anxiety, rawness, and gravitas, which is expected in a training that asks people to reflect on troubling events they have seen or experienced themselves.

Pre-Post Assessments

Pre and post survey questions measured on a 5-pt scale (1-low to 5-high) were conducted immediately before and after the trainings to measure the change in knowledge and opinions. Results from these responses were summarized in bar graphs comparing the mean pre-training responses to the mean post-training responses for each question.

Figure 2. Pre-Post Mean Score Survey Responses
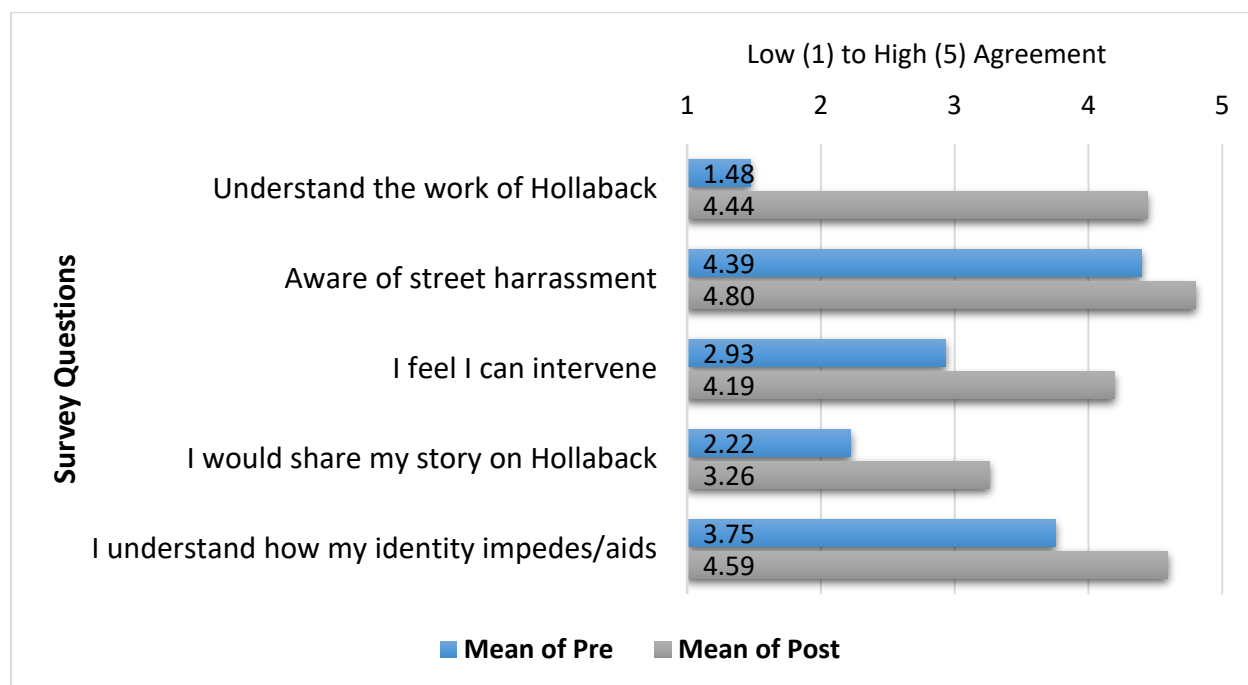
Using paired t-tests to compare the pre-and post-mean responses, all of the above differences were significant, $p < .0001$. Before the training, the average rating of confidence in ability to intervene was 2.93, which increased to 4.19 after the training (mean 1.3 points increase in agreement). Understanding of personal identity and how it may impede/aid intervention started at 3.75 pre-intervention and increased to 4.59 post-intervention. This indicated that many participants felt they were aware of their own perceived identities prior to the training and, because of the training, mean reported awareness increased by 0.83 points on the agreement scale.

Would You Recommend the Workshop?

Participants responded to the following prompt: Would you recommend this workshop? (yes/no). The responses indicated that 98.7% of participants who answered this question (N=302) would recommend this workshop.

Figure 3. Responses to 'Would you recommend this workshop' yes/no (N=302)
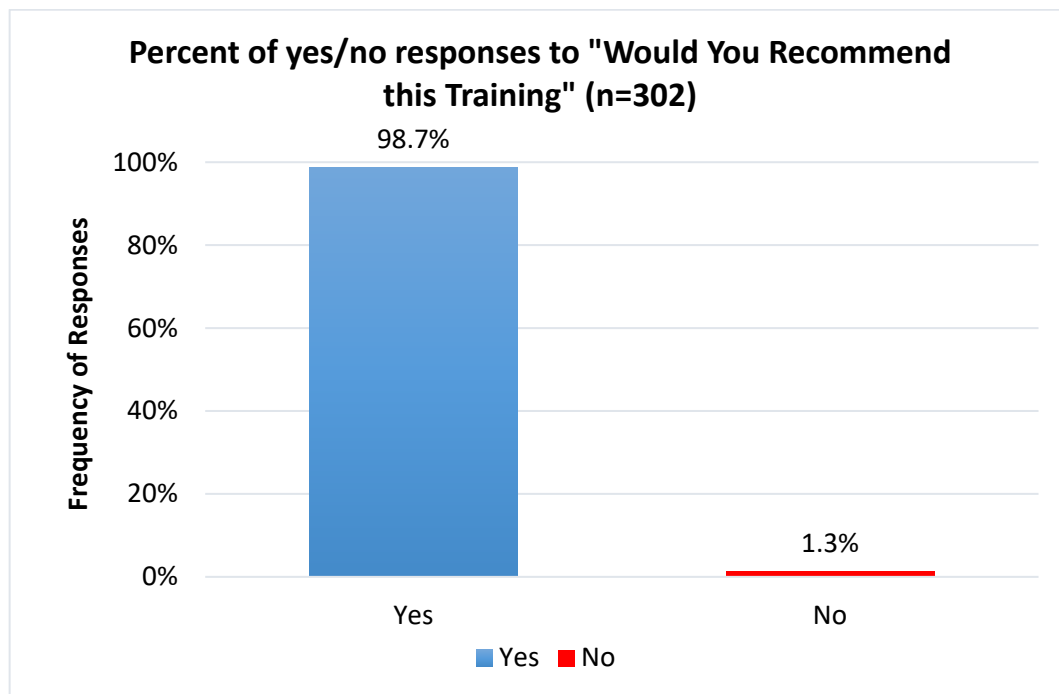
Out of the 302 participants who responded to this question, 98.7% reported: Yes, I would recommend this training. The responses to the qualitative results presented in the sections below offer insights into why most participants would recommend this training, and shed light on what can be improved.

Evaluation of specific attributes of the training were rated on a five point agreement scale (1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree). Questions included comprehensiveness of the introduction, usefulness of the information, engagement, and overall quality. We grouped responses into two categories. Response values 1-3 indicate disagreement or neutral responses (depicted in blue below) and 4-5 indicated agreement and strong agreement (depicted in green).

Figure 4. Assessment of Attributes of the Training, rated on 5-pt scale

Training Assessment
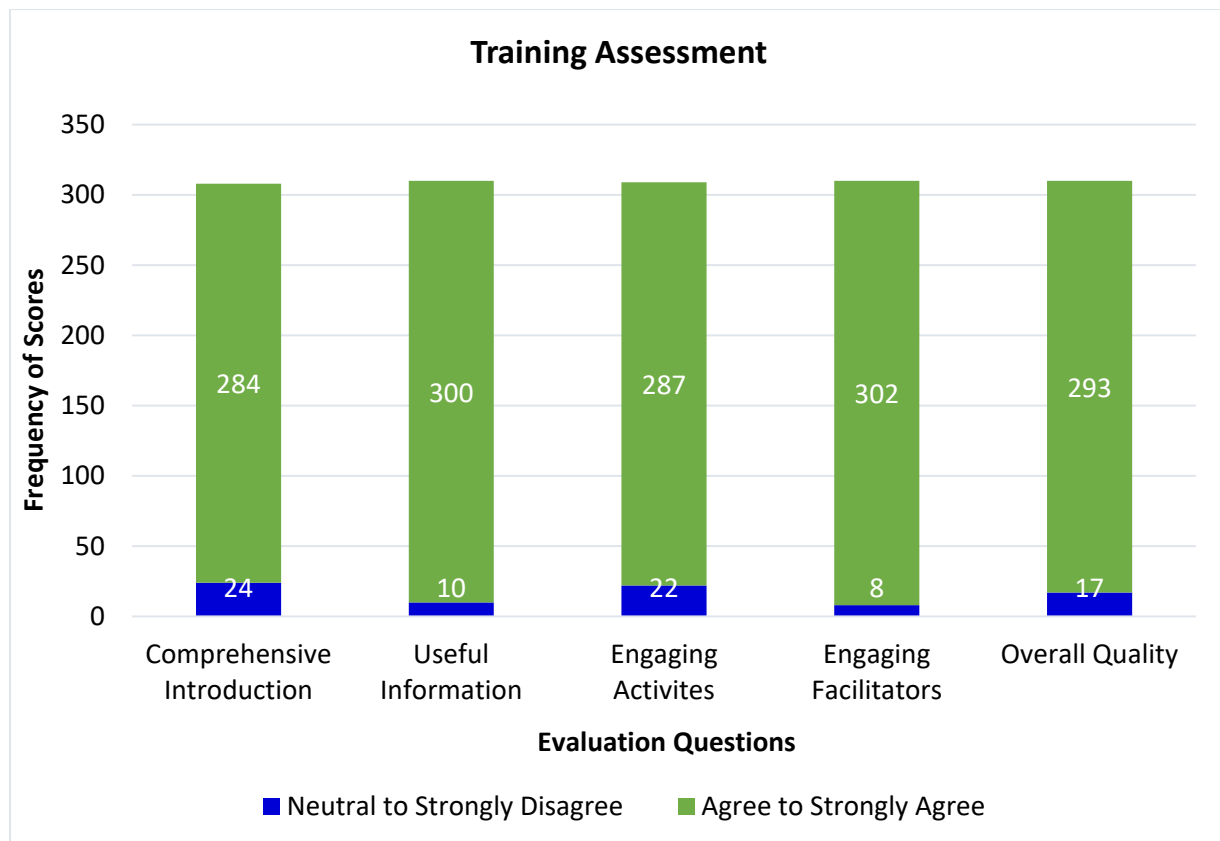
Overall, there was agreement that the training was comprehensive, useful, engaging, and of high quality.

"Best Thing" Open-Ended Responses

Respondents were asked to reflect on the best thing about the training in their own words. There were 290 responses for the "Best Thing" portion of the evaluation form. The responses reflected three common themes: interactive (95); case studies (60); and content related to intervention strategies (29).

The most commonly reported theme among the "Best Thing" comments was "interactive." This theme was determined by looking at the words "interactive", "interaction", "interactiveness", "share", "open", "discuss", and "safe" which were mentioned 95 times. Students had comments such as *"Interactive nature of this workshop/not simply a lecture"*; *"the creation of a safe space to share stories and learn about techniques to combat harassment"*; and, *"interactive - it was eye opening to hear about people's experiences."* Students responded positively to the interactive nature of the training and the safe space that was created made sharing personal stories a central part of the training's effectiveness.

The second largest theme was "case studies." The words, "case", "video", and "scenario" were mentioned 60 times among the "Best Thing" comments. One student said the best part of the training was *"watching the videos and applying the D's"*, while another said *"the use of videos of real situations and examples."* The students in the training seemed to find the case studies valuable because they provided real life examples and opportunities for practicing the intervention techniques.

During the trainings, participants learned about the 5 D's of intervention – Distract, Delay, Delegate, Direct, and Document. The words, "five", "5", and "6" (some students mentioned the 6 Ds to include the Decompress element) were mentioned 29 times. Students appeared to appreciate the straightforwardness of the techniques. One student said *"Having phrases that we can put in our toolkit! Very helpful."* Another said *"I appreciated having example statements available per the 5 Ds-concrete action to take is helpful".* Not only did students view the content as helpful, but many found it was taught in a way that made it simple to apply: *"I gained confidence that I can intervene in such situations".*

Another interesting note was on the facilitators. There were 12 comments that mentioned the facilitators as the best thing in the training with one student mentioning the diversity of the trainers as a plus. It is important to note that the diversity of the trainers varied depending on which two people were hosting a given training.

"Unanswered" Open-Ended Responses

The section of the evaluation asked students to note any unanswered questions. The following themes emerged from the 92 responses to this question (28.8% of all completed evaluations).

Many students had questions about the possibility of in-class practice such as providing opportunities to role-play and act out the skills taught in the workshop. One student suggested live action scenarios, while another noted that practicing specific wording to use when intervening would be helpful. Some students wanted to learn more about resources specific to bystander intervention on the BU campus and in Boston.

Students were also interested in the role diversity plays in bystander interventions. One student wrote *"Cultures intersection of intervening"* as something that they wanted to learn more about and another wrote *"how to help immigrants who face race harassment & are scared to defend themselves"*. Some students looked at the intersectionality between gender and the ability to intervene for example: *"What happens when men are the subject of harassment when you're a female bystander?"* and *"Address more how men can be advocates"*.

Although the training was specific to bystander intervention there were a few questions where students wanted to know what to do when they were the ones being harassed. Additionally, students wanted more information on how to intervene when they are alone.

"Suggestions" Open-Ended Responses

In the portion of the assessment asking for comments and suggestions for improvement, there were 115 suggestions. Excluding the numerous "N/A" responses or "great job" and "thank you" comments, the suggestions were categorized into the following themes: role-play activities, length of the workshop, facilitators, trigger warnings, and general content.

The request for role-play activities was reported numerous times. The chance to simulate utilization of the 5 Ds was widely requested, exemplified by the response *"More examples that allow us to practice how we would intervene as bystanders."*

Additionally, the length of the workshop was a common concern – some participants thought the entire lab could have been shortened (multiple people thought this could be done through less pair/small group discussions), while others recommended having a break at the middle of the session.

Multiple participants also commented on the lack of diversity in facilitators, suggesting it would be good to have more women and people of color involved. A couple of individuals felt very strongly about this, with one stating that it was *"Inappropriate that a white man led this... I learned more from my classmates in this discussion than from the instructor. Curriculum emphasized waiting for a white man to step in, saying please and thank you...offered very little practical advice for those getting harassed."* As mentioned above, depending on the facilitators available at each time slot, there were different gender and racial make-ups of the facilitators for each session. The training team is working on training a more diverse group of facilitators to address these concerns.

Another suggestion was the inclusion of a trigger warning (n=3). This is understandable given that sensitive topics are covered in this training. One participant stated, *"I don't know that I was really prepared to walk into this."* To address these concerns we have started sending out pre-training handouts to prepare participants with detailed information about what will be covered in the training.

Content-based responses were varied, however, many recommended having more examples. Multiple suggestions involved addressing harassment on social media, what to do if we are the ones being harassed, tips for protection, and the potential inclusion of data on the issue of street harassment and how it affects people. In response to this feedback we have created a handout modeled after Hollaback!'s resources list containing information for participants on where to find additional resources and support on various topics related to public harassment.

There were many positive responses listed in the suggestions section of the assessment. One participant stated that *"As many people as possible should get this training."* Another suggested, "*BU undergrad should do this instead of the trainings they use now."*

Visions of a future

Although not a part of the formal evaluation, we would like to share what the students envisioned in a world without public harassment. This exercise was conducted at the very beginning of the training. Participants were asked to imagine a world without public harassment and write what would be different for you, your family, or your community. Responses were recorded on flip-sheets pasted to the walls of the training room.

"Imagine a world without public harassment. What would be different…?"

For your community

- *"Our identities would not be de-legitimized"*
- *"Women could feel safer in their own community"*
- *"Able to make more eye contact and say hi to strangers"*
- *"Everyone would be happier"*
- *"Better mental health"*

Of the 77 quotes recorded in this section, the predominant themes were safety, peace, and cohesion. Participants viewed harassment as a divisive force in communities, creating distrust and encouraging violence. Without public harassment, there was a general sentiment that communities would be more cohesive, have a *"sense of belonging and trust,"* and be safer places to inhabit. What was particularly interesting was that ignoring public harassment was seen as a symptom of accepting violent behavior on a larger scale, including gun-violence, sex trafficking, and murders. By chipping away at the foundational perceptions that aggression in the form of public harassment was acceptable, participants reported that this would echo throughout other forms of violence as well. For instance participants reported that in a world without public harassment their communities would experience *"less sex trafficking"*; *"less murders"*; and be a step towards a *"gun-free world*."

For your family

- *"They would not have to worry about something happening to me"*
- *"Parents wouldn't worry about their daughters moving to a new city alone"*
- *"We would outwardly celebrate our culture"*
- *"Feel my cousin/sister/mom is safe"*

Participants indicated that they would feel less fear and worry for their family members if there was no public harassment. A common theme was that parents would be less concerned for their safety, and there could be less family tension because parents would not be as worried about checking-in on their children. One participant mentioned, *"We would outwardly celebrate our culture"* which was echoed in other responses indicating that harassment affects how families express their identity in public.

For you

- *"Walk home at night without fear"*
- *"No fear/discomfort/hyper-awareness when walking down the street"*
- *"Not having to look over my shoulder when I walk home"*
- *"Feeling of a safer environment"*
- *"I could wear whatever I wanted and not have to think twice about it"*

Individuals described that their world would be less circumscribed; they could travel more without fear, wear what they wanted, and run where they wanted. In addition to physical safety, there was a general tone that they could also express who they are more freely *"Free expression of opinions, religion, etc.";* *"freedom to express to think and express my thoughts openly"; "feel less afraid about being openly gay",* and *"freedom to just be".* This taps into a side of harassment that is hard to measure - how harassment can silence people and prevent them from engaging in their communities.

Incorporating Lessons from the Evaluations

In the process of adopting this training into the BUSPH community we plan to adjust the program to reflect more closely what is relevant to this community, particularly the pre-and post-assessment questions. In addition, we have taken steps to reduce the length of the presentation and allow for more breaks. With the help of students, we are drafting additional case studies and practice opportunities to respond to feedback that participants want more chances to practice these techniques. We are in the process of piloting these changes in community trainings throughout the Boston area and training a more diverse group of facilitators. We have also begun sending out information to participants prior to the trainings to prepare them for the topics covered and provide them with suggestions on how to take care of themselves and each other during the trainings.

Conclusion/Summary

The trainings conducted at BUSPH in Fall 2018 showed promising results. Many students indicated that they benefited from the training and found the material engaging and worthwhile. The training facilitators have been working to incorporate this feedback to improve the trainings. We hope these trainings will continue at BUSPH given the positive feedback and interest in this topic.

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