

Educating the Educated

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Less than one-third of my classmates are female. Fortunately, this is not a widespread issue across medical schools today. In fact, according to the AAMC, there are more women enrolled in US medical schools than men as of 2017. Being a minority in class is a thing of the past... in most medical schools, at least. This is not to say that my university does not put effort into recruiting and welcoming women. However, this skewed ratio affects our culture on campus, and women feel it everyday. For many, there is an unspoken pressure to do better than our male counterparts so that we are respected and deemed just as smart and hard working, only adding to the enormous amount of stress that medical students already experience. While many women on my campus are forthright enough to stand up for themselves, some are not, and those are the women who suffer the most.

During my first year of medical school, I hadn't experienced much sexism from my classmates. I felt comfortable speaking my mind and believed that my male classmates saw me as their equal. So when I heard of some of the ignorant comments made towards my female class-mates, I was shocked, and honestly, hurt. I truly thought our cohort was better than that, more enlightened. Yet, it turned out we were not exempt from this prejudice. As an AMWA member and branch leader, I felt a responsibility to be an advocate for those women. When I asked around about

the issue, I learned how common it really was. Several women had experienced sexist comments in their group discussions in class, but more importantly, they felt like no one was listening to them when they spoke up about it.

At first, I had no idea of how to handle the situation. I felt like all of these personal issues had just been dropped in my lap and, somehow, I had the responsibility to find a solution for a problem that had plagued our field since the beginning of time. This wasn't something that a single well-ness lecture or a stern email from the dean would solve. I needed to help educate our class-mates on what sexism is and how we can stop perpetuating it in our everyday language.

Comments like, "That's what the real world is like, better get used to it now..." and "People are always going to find a reason to complain..." showed how afraid we were to change the status quo. Yet I kept pushing the issue because I believed if I had a chance to change our classmates' minds while we are still in training, we could help build a culture of inclusion and equality with our medical teams and patients long after graduation. I wanted our class to be an example for those that came after us so we could perpetuate justice instead of sexism.

I knew the only way I could make systemic changes in our school would be through administration. I walked in to a meeting with our campus dean and the president of the student government already feeling defensive

and emotional. My face was hot and I was sweating before we even started. It was incredibly frustrating to me that others did not see the need for a change. This topic that seemed so black and white to me was now the subject of a lively debate. In the end, however, I was pleasantly surprised with the understanding tone of the conversation. After I explained what some of the women had been experiencing, our dean asked, "What do you think is the best way for me to address this?" I paused for a moment, not expecting him to rely so heavily on my insight, then replied, "We need to educate our students on how a culture of sexism can affect the learning environment and personal lives of our female classmates." I suggested that some of the class group discussions purposely revolve around issues like these to get the conversation flowing, and that he set a "no-tolerance" tone during his next in-person announcement to the class. He very willingly agreed and offered that he also planned to create a training for our staff and faculty on dealing with and stopping discrimination of all kinds on campus. Later that month, a few fellow classmates presented to our Board of Trustees and incorporated into their talk a description of our efforts on the movement. The board was extremely supportive and even offered funding for recruitment initiatives, education, and resources to help our cause if needed. I was so relieved; my faith and pride in our institution were reinvigorated.

I learned how to truly be a leader through this experience. I was able to be a voice for those who needed it and to advocate for my peers who felt ignored. I learned that asking for help and encouraging a conversation can make such a difference in cultural issues like these. Changing the culture on my campus will not happen overnight and certainly will not change the culture globally, but I can only hope that my classmates will carry their newfound knowledge and awareness into practice and

continue to educate their coworkers, family, and friends. By first acknowledging our biases and then transforming our language, we can eventually transform our field. Sometimes all it takes is a little education.