

An interprofessional cohort analysis of student interest in medical ethics education: A survey-based quantitative study

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Abstract

Background : There is continued need for enhanced medical ethics education across the United States, particularly in an interprofessional setting. In an effort to guide medical ethics education reform, we report the first interprofessional survey of a cohort of graduate medical, nursing and allied health professional students that examined perceived student need for more formalized medical ethics education and assessed preferences for teaching methods in a graduate level bioethics curriculum.

Methods : In January 2018, a cross-sectional survey was conducted with 562 of 1,357 responses received (41% overall response rate) among students enrolled in the School of Medicine, College of Nursing, Doctor of Physical Therapy and BS/(D)MD Professional Scholars programs at the [Name of institution blinded for review]. An in person or web-based questionnaire was designed to measure perceived need for a more structured bioethics curriculum.

Results : The majority of respondents were female (333, 59.3%), white (326, 58.0%) and mid-20s in age (340, 60.5%). Almost half of respondents (47%) reported no prior medical ethics exposure or training in their previous educational experience, while 60% of students across all degree programs reported an interest in more ethics education and 92% noted that an understanding of medical ethics was important to their future career. Over a quarter of students (28%) were interested in pursuing graduate-level training in medical ethics, with case-based discussions, small group peer settings and ethics guest lectures being the most desired teaching methods.

Conclusions : The future physician, nursing and physical therapist workforce in our medical community demonstrated an unmet need and strong interest for more formal medical ethics education within their current coursework. Integration of interprofessional training in medical ethics may serve as a vital curricular approach to improving the training of ethically competent healthcare professionals and overcoming the current hierarchical clinical silos.

Background

Although interprofessional education (IPE) has become recognized as an important teaching method for education curricula in the United States [1], there have been decades of debate about the joint education of nursing and medical students [2–5]. While the current culture of medicine is shifting towards a patient-centered multidisciplinary healthcare system and ethical dilemmas are becoming increasingly complex with modern technology and treatment regimens, medical ethics education curricula have been slow to adopt an interprofessional collaborative environment [6]. By teaching medical ethics to students of different health professional programs in an interdisciplinary and integrative setting, educators will inspire an atmosphere of cooperation and willingness to improve collaboration and communication, mutual respect and shared planning, and decision making in clinical practice [7]. Interprofessional collaboration is an ideal method to explore ethical dilemmas because it allows inclusion for all relevant

professional perspectives and encourages collaboration and respect, while also highlighting the strengths of each individual profession's perspective towards patient care [8–10].

Lin and colleagues implemented a pilot study in a single Taiwanese institution of an interprofessional problem-based learning curriculum of clinical ethics among medical and nursing students [11]. Results revealed a significant improvement in attitudes and confidence of interprofessional collaboration among students in a mixed group setting as opposed to the medical student group alone. Other studies have also found that healthcare professionals who received interprofessional education displayed better adherence to practice guidelines and standards with improved patient satisfaction and outcomes as compared to control groups [12]. Combining medical ethics education across disciplines has the potential to strengthen ethics education and curriculum across the board [7, 13–14]. The integration of medical ethics IPE across health professions will ultimately strengthen physician, nursing and allied health collaboration, reduce moral distress and burnout, bridge the unwritten hierarchical gap between professions, and improve overall patient-centered care. There have been no surveys to date reported in the literature assessing an interprofessional cohort of health professional students' perceived need for medical ethics education, desire for more formal training in medical ethics, and preferences for the structure of such training.

Through implementation of a student-based survey across medical, nursing and allied health professional disciplines, the purpose of this quantitative study was to examine student need and gauge the perceived value for a more integrative medical ethics education curriculum. Additionally, we examined preferences for the format design and curricular components of a graduate level education curriculum. In order to better serve the educational needs and promote interprofessional collaboration among the next generation of healthcare providers, educators must first better understand the differing perspectives among learners in various health professions degree programs in order to guide IPE curricular development. Our findings aim to provide a model for curricular reform that educators and administrators can integrate into the medical ethics education curriculum at our and other institutions.

Methods

Study Sample

[Name of institution blinded for review] is [Name of state blinded for review]'s state-sponsored center for medical education that includes the School of Medicine (SOM), the College of Nursing (CON) and the Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) program in the College of Allied Health Sciences as well as a combined BS/(D)MD undergraduate degree program. We extended an invitation to complete our survey to 1,357 students enrolled in the following four programs: 822 students at the SOM (379 in pre-clerkship years and 443 in clerkship years), 370 graduate level students in the CON and 88 undergraduate students in the BS/(D)MD Professional Scholars Program were invited to participate by institutional email; 77 graduate level students in the DPT degree program were provided the survey to complete in paper form. We conducted the study from the beginning of January 2018 to the end of February 2018. A total of 562

students responded to the questionnaire (41% response rate). Response rates varied from 21% of CON students to 94% of DPT students.

Survey Instrument

The questionnaire included an informed consent cover letter explaining the nature of the study, voluntary participation and anonymity of respondents. We offered no form of compensation to participants. We used the One45 software system to administer the survey for SOM, Qualtrics to administer the survey to CON and the BS/(D)MD Professional Scholars Program, and an identical paper-based questionnaire to survey graduate level students in the DPT degree program. We chose the method of survey delivery based on the surveying system most familiar to each respective program and included an identical questionnaire with the same informed consent to all students surveyed. The survey instrument explored (1) respondent demographics and prior education, (2) perceptions about the current level of medical ethics exposure in existing degree programs, (3) attitudes and interest for more formalized medical ethics curriculum, and (4) preferred format design and delivery components among students interested in a graduate certificate or master's degree in medical ethics. We gauged student interest in various aspect of medical ethics education using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 'very unlikely' or 'not important at all' to 5 'very likely' or 'very important'. The final four survey questions on curriculum format design and delivery were only available to respondents who selected that they were somewhat likely or very likely to pursue graduate level medical ethics training in the preceding question. Our study was approved by the [Name of institution blinded for review] Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis

We calculated descriptive statistics including the means, percentages and standard deviations (SD). The t-test and one-way ANOVA with the Scheffe post-hoc test were used to analyze respondents' characteristics and to examine whether there were any significant differences based on respective educational program. Respondents in the SOM cohort were further divided into students in pre-clerkship years and clerkship years to examine differences among attitude measures with respect to progression of practical clinical experience and exposure. We conducted all analyses using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0 (IBM Corp, Armonk, New York). Graphics are displayed using Microsoft Excel 2019.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics, including anticipated length to graduation, age, gender, race and ethnicity, undergraduate major and previous ethics education of respondents are displayed in *Table 1* based on respective educational program. The majority of respondents were female (333, 59.3%), white (326, 58.0%), mid-20s in age (340, 60.5%) and with 2-3 years (297, 52.8%) remaining in their respective degree program prior to graduation. A notable majority of nursing students (32, 40.5%) were over 33 years

of age, while all BS/(D)MD students (70, 100%) were under 22 years of age. A large majority of the BS/(D)MD students (63, 90.0%) indicated an Asian race.

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of respondents across all educational programs (n = 562)

[Insert Table 1 here]

The majority of students indicated an undergraduate major in biological sciences (329, 58.5%). Students across educational programs reported a varying amount of previous ethics coursework or training, with almost half of the respondents (267, 47.5%) reporting no prior ethics education or training. A large percentage of SOM (168, 49.4%), BS/(D)MD (46, 65.7%) and DPT (31, 42.5%) students reported no previous bioethics or medical ethics education, while a majority of nursing students (57, 72.2%) indicated they had some form of previous ethics training or coursework.

Perceived Need for Medical Ethics Education

Most respondents (340, 60.6%) across all degree programs endorsed interest in a more formalized medical ethics education curriculum in addition to the medical ethics currently integrated into their respective degree program coursework. Expressed interest was highest among BS/(D)MD undergraduate students (59, 84.3%) and lowest among DPT students (38, 52.8%).

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of understanding fundamental principles of medical ethics and bioethics to their future careers from 1 “not important at all” to 5 “very important”. The majority of students (522, 92.9%) across all degree programs reported an understanding of ethics as somewhat (172, 30.6%) or very important (350, 62.3%) to their future career as displayed in *Figure 1*. The BS/(D)MD undergraduate students [4.89 (0.32)] placed more importance on understanding of ethics to their future career when compared to all other groups ($p < .001$), whereas the DPT graduate students [4.34 (0.84)] displayed the lowest level of importance of ethics understanding to their future career ($p < .001$). While there were no statistically significant differences between medical students in preclinical versus clinical years, the perceived importance of ethics to future medical students declined across progressive cohorts [SOM students in preclinical years, 4.52 (0.89) and SOM students in clinical years, 4.36 (0.89)].

Figure 1 Importance of medical ethics to participants’ future career by educational program (n = 562)

[Insert Figure 1 here]

While assessing respondent interest in a graduate-level medical ethics curriculum from 1 “very unlikely” to 5 “very likely”, 161 (28.6%) respondents showed interest as being somewhat likely (117, 20.8%) or very likely (44, 7.8%) to pursue graduate level training. As outlined in *Table 2*, interest in graduate level training was highest among BS/(D)MD undergraduate students [3.19 (1.04)] and lowest among medical students in clerkship years [2.49 (1.25)] and DPT graduate students [2.21 (1.11)]. A significant portion of BS/(D)MD undergraduate students (29, 41.4%, $p < .001$) reported that they were somewhat likely or very

likely to pursue graduate level ethics education, compared to 10 (13.7%) DPT students and 37 (22.6%) medical students in their clerkship years.

Table 2 Respondent interest in pursuing graduate level medical ethics training by educational program (n = 562)

[Insert Table 2 here]

Preferences for Medical Ethics Curriculum

Of the respondents (n = 161) who reported that they were somewhat likely or very likely to pursue graduate level ethics training, the top motivational factors for interest are illustrated in *Figure 2*. Importance to career (130, 80.7%) and desire to help others (124, 77.0%) were among the top two motivational factors reported across all programs. Enjoyment of learning (104, 64.6%) and desire to provide healthcare ethics consultation (81, 50.3%) were additional motivational factors for over half of all respondents.

Figure 2 Motivational factors for interest in graduate level ethics training across all educational programs (n = 161)

[Insert Figure 2 here]

In regard to preferred curricular format, respondents across all programs interested in pursuing graduate level training favored interest in the graduate certification program. Majority of respondents (141, 90.3%) were at least somewhat interested in a graduate certificate program (n = 156), and 49 (31.0%) respondents were at least somewhat likely to pursue a master's degree program (n = 158, p <.01). CON students preferred a fully online program, whereas SOM, BS/(D)MD and DPT students preferred a hybrid learning format.

The top educational components desired among respondents interested in pursuing graduate level training in a medical ethics curriculum are illustrated in *Figure 3*. Ethics case-based discussions (130, 80.7%) and ethics guest lectures (126, 78.3%) were among the top two components desired in the curriculum across all respective degree programs. Ethics discussions in small peer groups (101, 62.7%), an introductory course in foundations of bioethics (100, 62.1%), faculty-student mentorship sessions (99, 61.5%), palliative care/hospice clerkship rotation (94, 58.4%) and healthcare ethics consultation review committee exposure (89, 55.3%) were additional educational components desired by over half of the respondents.

Figure 3 Educational components desired in graduate level ethics training across all educational programs (n = 161)

[Insert Figure 3 here]

Discussion

Although studies have shown that IPE can be a successful, integrative educational tool for teaching medical ethics to enhance student perspective, critical thinking, empathy, collaboration and communication in the healthcare setting [7, 14], student interest and attitudes toward desired curriculum among the various health professions degree programs have not been fully assessed. We report the first survey noted in the literature assessing an interprofessional cohort of students' perceived need for and interest in further medical ethics education. Our data reveals that nearly one-half of students in health professional degree programs have not received any formal training in medical ethics and over 60% of students from three major disciplines reported a need for further medical ethics education. Over 90% of students across disciplines believed an understanding of medical ethics is important to their careers, and notably nearly 30% of students showed interest in graduate level training. Approximately 90% of respondents interested in further ethics training indicated that they were at least somewhat likely to pursue a graduate certification versus 39% indicating that they were at least somewhat likely to pursue a master's degree. Overall, the results from this study show that the future physician, nursing professional and physical therapist workforce demonstrate a perceived unmet need for more formal medical ethics education.

While students reported a broad range of methods desired to teach the educational material, students generally agree on case-based narratives, small group peer discussion and guest lectures as effective teaching methods for medical ethics. Many recent studies support the integration of interactive peer-led, narrative scenarios and case-based small group formats as increasingly popular methods among student preferences to foster experiential learning and problem-solving skills [15–19]. This format allows students to develop practical approaches to solving common ethical dilemmas faced in the clinical setting through open discussion with peers. Furthermore, an educational setting that takes a narrative approach and encourages dialogue specifically in an interprofessional setting has been shown to build upon the three conceptual vertical layers of professional identity, provider-patient communication and interprofessional teamwork [20]. Using the narrative approach and encouraging open dialogue communication in the interprofessional setting can facilitate the development of a single, united voice among healthcare providers directing patient-centered care.

An important aspect to consider in the interpretation of this study is not only the diversity in the sample population when making comparisons between the four different health professional programs surveyed, but also the diversity in degree tracts and delivery format within each degree program. For example, CON respondents encompass students in a variety of nursing concentrations including a distance accessible hybrid research-focused doctorate (PhD), a fully online practice doctorate (DNP) and a traditional campus-based clinical nurse leader (MSN) program. In contrast, the BS/(D)MD student respondents are all pursuing a degree in cell molecular biology with a planned matriculation into medical or dental school following their third year of undergraduate studies. By the very nature and teaching format of these individual programs, respondents are exposed to different curricular components and delivery formats which undoubtedly have an influence on students' perception and attitudes toward medical ethics.

Logistics in the development of a more formalized curriculum must be strategically considered to account for the potential difficulty in time constraints and scheduling practicality among students across interprofessional education programs.

Medical ethics education in the health professional curriculum has become a priority among educators and is continuing to evolve. However, the limited time allotted in traditional education curricula leave the content and delivery format of medical ethics education across disciplines open for debate [17–19]. As educators, we are challenged by the significant variation and lack of succinct goals and outcomes in medical ethics teaching methods across institutions nationwide [6, 21–22]. Studies report effective teaching methods to include further integration of ethics throughout the entire four-year medical school curriculum, small group peer-facilitated discussion, greater than 20 hours of undergraduate medical ethics education, and support for an elective ethics course as effective means to increase moral reasoning skills [19, 23–24].

Our analysis is not without limitations including the relatively low response rate of 41% compares with most online surveys and was likely the result of administering surveys in an online format to an already heavily surveyed and busy student groups. This was particularly evident among nursing students, who largely were engaged in clerkship rotations on satellite campuses away from our home institution. Results may not be generalized nationally as our participants do not represent students from all institutions across the state or country. However, as [Name of institution blinded for review] is the only state-sponsored medical institution, our sample population is likely comparative to a major portion of the future healthcare workforce for the state. Future surveys need to incorporate more direct questions about students' attitudes specifically towards interprofessional coursework and assessment of IPE impact on learners using educational outcomes and observable behaviors. Despite its limitations, we are encouraged by the survey results which suggest an overall high student-driven interest in medical ethics training. A year after distribution of this survey, we have developed a 10-credit hour graduate level certification in medical ethics with an emphasis on interprofessional education, which has been approved for interested incoming graduate health professional students supported by the significant student interest expressed in this study.

Curricular components of this certification program will include a foundations course for classroom discussion on landmark bioethics literature topics, small group clinical case-based discussions, clinician bioethicists-student mentorship, hospital ethics committee shadowing experiences, mock ethics committee debates, bioethics guest lectures and a capstone bioethics project. Additionally, in order to foster a more interprofessional dialogue on real-time clinical ethical dilemmas, our Center for Bioethics and Health Policy has spearheaded adult and pediatric Bioethics Performance Improvement Teams (BIOPIT) where nurses, physicians, case managers, social workers and other health professionals have a forum to discuss complex healthcare decisions. Other institutions who have developed similar processes have documented decreased moral distress amongst participants [25], and we are currently in the process of studying the effects of the BIOPIT on provider and nursing moral distress. These emerging programs and similar interprofessional efforts will be incorporated into future medical ethics education.

Conclusions

Our findings have demonstrated interest among health professional students across medical, nursing and allied health disciplines for more structured teaching in medical ethics and a desire for graduate level coursework. In order to successfully integrate medical ethics education in an interprofessional setting, it is important to assess the differences in attitudes and preferences among participating students across varying degree programs. We report the first study to examine attitudes about medical ethics education among a broad range of students from multiple disciplines of medicine, including physician, nursing and physical therapy professionals. Our findings have the potential to guide educational policy and curricular reform regarding training in medical ethics.

Teaching medical ethics to healthcare professional students together in an interprofessional context offers a significant opportunity to address the barriers between medical professionals in current clinical practice. Fostering interprofessional respect during the education process may break down these hierarchical barriers between future physicians, nurses and allied health professionals. The perceived power differentials between disciplines can be directly addressed in the educational setting where major power differentials have yet to be established by norms of current clinical practice and students generally feel safe to discuss challenging moral, professional and bioethical dilemmas among peers. As leaders of patient-centered multidisciplinary care, clinician-educators specifically have the ability and responsibility to advocate for enhanced medical ethics education in an interprofessional setting. Our data from a large interprofessional cohort survey suggests a current unmet need and enthusiasm for the potential impact of an expanded medical ethics training on enhancing medical education curriculum and the broader realm of medicine by training morally competent healthcare providers. Future work will aim to evaluate the impact of IPE on training morally and ethically future healthcare providers using high-level educational outcomes.

List Of Abbreviations

BIOPIT: Bioethics Performance Improvement Team

BS/(D)MD: Bachelor of Science/Doctor of (Dental) Medicine

CON: College of Nursing

DNP: Doctor of Nursing Practice

DPT: Doctor of Physical Therapy

IPE: Interprofessional Education

MSN: Master of Science in Nursing

PhD: Doctor of Philosophy

SOM: School of Medicine

SD: Standard Deviation

Declarations

Ethical approval and consent to participate

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Augusta University on January 8, 2018 (reference #1165625–2). The status was determined exempt due to its educational purpose, minimal risk status and anonymity of collected data. Participant written informed consent was obtained prior to administration of the questionnaire and after the voluntary nature of participation was explained.

Consent for publication

All the authors have given consent for publication.

Availability of data and materials

The dataset supporting the conclusions of this study is available from the corresponding author upon request at mdefoor@augusta.edu.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Funding

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

MD and RS were responsible for the study conception and design as well as major drafting of the manuscript. YC participated heavily in data collection and data analysis/interpretation. YC, JZ, and JD participated in collaboration of study design, data interpretation and critical revision/final approval of the submitted manuscript.

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Tables

Table 1 Demographic characteristics of respondents across all educational programs (n=562)

	CON ^a (n=79)	SOM ^b (n=340)	BS/(D)MD ^c (n=70)	DPT ^d (n=73)	Overall (n=562)
Anticipated time to graduation, years					
≤ 1 year	48 (60.8%)	107 (31.5%)	19 (27.1%)	30 (41.1%)	204 (36.3%)
2-3 years	29 (36.7%)	187 (55.0%)	38 (54.3%)	43 (58.9%)	297 (52.8%)
≥ 4 years	2 (2.5%)	46 (13.5%)	13 (18.6%)	N/A	61 (10.9%)
Age group, years					
≤ 22	4 (5.1%)	42 (12.4%)	70 (100.0%)	7 (9.6%)	123 (21.9%)
23-27	24 (30.4%)	255 (75.0%)	0 (0.0%)	61 (83.6%)	340 (60.5%)
28-32	19 (24.1%)	40 (11.8%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (4.1%)	62 (11.0%)
≥ 33	32 (40.5%)	3 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.7%)	37 (6.6%)
Gender					
Female	67 (84.8%)	176 (51.8%)	44 (62.9%)	46 (63.0%)	333 (59.3%)
Male	12 (15.2%)	160 (47.1%)	25 (35.7%)	27 (37.0%)	224 (39.9%)
Gender variant/Non-conforming	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.9%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (0.5%)
Prefer not to answer	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (1.4%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.4%)
Race/Ethnicity					
Asian ^a	3	66	63	9	141 (25.1%)

	(3.8%)	(19.4%)	(90.0%)	(12.3%)	
Black/African American ^a	17	27	1	1	46
	(21.5%)	(7.9%)	(1.4%)	(1.4%)	(8.2%)
Hispanic/Latino	1	13	0	3	17
	(1.3%)	(3.8%)	(0.0%)	(4.1%)	(3.0%)
White/Caucasian ^e	54	209	6	57	326 (58.0%)
	(68.4%)	(61.5%)	(8.6%)	(78.1%)	
Other or Mixed Race	4	25	0	3	32
	(5.1%)	(7.4%)	(0.0%)	(4.1%)	(5.7%)

Undergraduate major

Bachelor of Science in Nursing	31	0	0	0	31
	(39.2%)	(0.0%)	(0.0%)	(0.0%)	(5.5%)
Biological Sciences	13	241	63	12	329 (58.5%)
	(16.5%)	(70.9%)	(90.0%)	(16.4%)	
Engineering	0	21	1	1	23
	(0.0%)	(6.2%)	(1.4%)	(1.4%)	(4.1%)
Liberal Arts and Humanities	10	27	0	1	38
	(12.7%)	(7.9%)	(0.0%)	(1.4%)	(6.8%)
Physical Sciences	0	18	0	0	18
	(0.0%)	(5.3%)	(0.0%)	(0.0%)	(3.2%)
Other	25	33	6	59	123 (21.9%)
	(31.6%)	(9.7%)	(8.6%)	(80.8%)	

Previous ethics education

Certification, seminar or workshop training	5	28	6	2	41
	(6.3%)	(8.2%)	(8.6%)	(2.7%)	(7.3%)
Former job training	5	12	2	2	21
	(6.3%)	(3.5%)	(2.9%)	(2.7%)	(3.7%)
Graduate level course	30	56	0	19	105 (18.7%)
	(38.0%)	(16.5%)	(0.0%)	(26.0%)	

Undergraduate level course	17 (21.5%)	76 (22.4%)	16 (22.9%)	19 (26.0%)	128 (22.8%)
None/not applicable	22 (27.8%)	168 (49.4%)	46 (65.7%)	31 (42.5%)	267 (47.5%)

^aCollege of Nursing, ^bSchool of Medicine, ^cBS/(D)MD Professional Scholars Program, ^dDoctor of Physical Therapy, ^eNon-hispanic ethnicity

Table 2 Respondent interest in pursuing graduate level medical ethics training by educational program (n=562)

	CON ^a (n=79)	SOM (3&4) ^b (n=164)	SOM (1&2) ^c (n=176)	BS/(D)MD ^d (n=70)	DPT ^e (n=73)	Overall (n=562)
Mean (SD*)	2.59 (1.30)	2.49 (1.25)	2.82 (1.34)	3.19 (1.04)	2.21 (1.11)	2.66 (1.27)
Somewhat + very likely	23 (29.1%)	37 (22.6%)	62 (35.2%)	29 (41.4%)	10 (13.7%)	161 (28.6%)

^aCollege of Nursing, ^bSchool of Medicine clerkship years, ^cSchool of Medicine pre-clerkship years, ^dBS/(D)MD Professional Scholars Program, ^eDoctor of Physical Therapy, *Standard Deviation

Figures

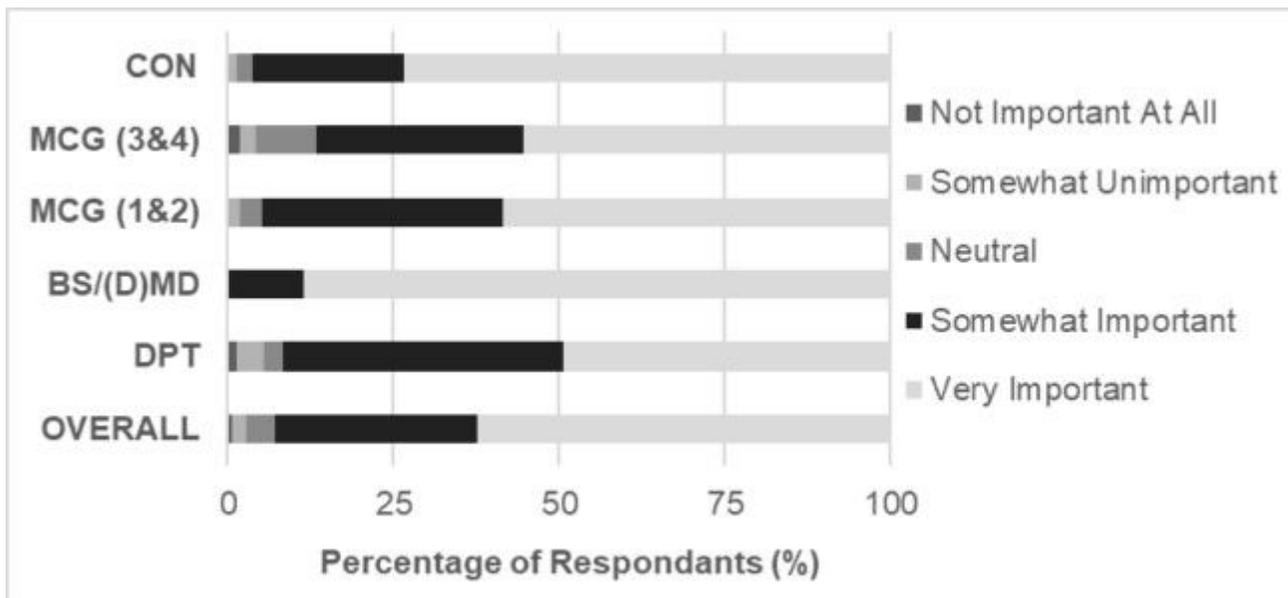


Figure 1

Importance of medical ethics to participants' future career by educational program (n=562). College of Nursing, CON; School of Medicine, clerkship years, SOM (3&4); School of Medicine pre-clerkship years, SOM (1&2); BS/MD and BS/DMD Professional Scholars Program, BS/(D)MD; Doctor of Physical Therapy, DPT

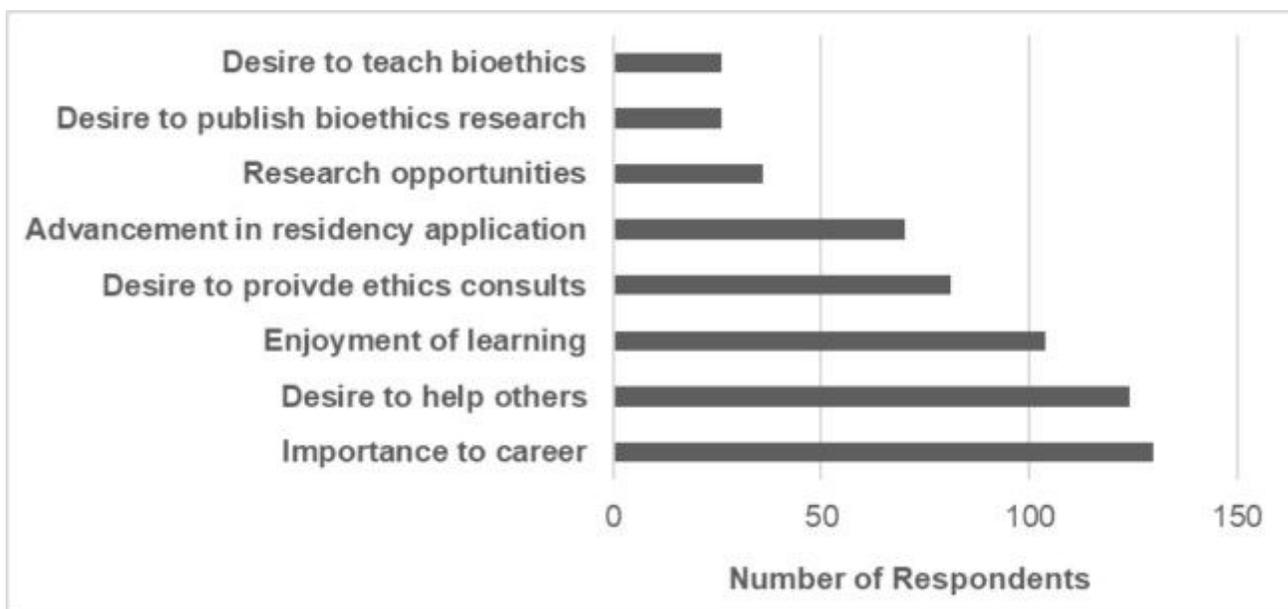


Figure 2

Motivational factors for interest in graduate level ethics training across all educational programs (n=161)

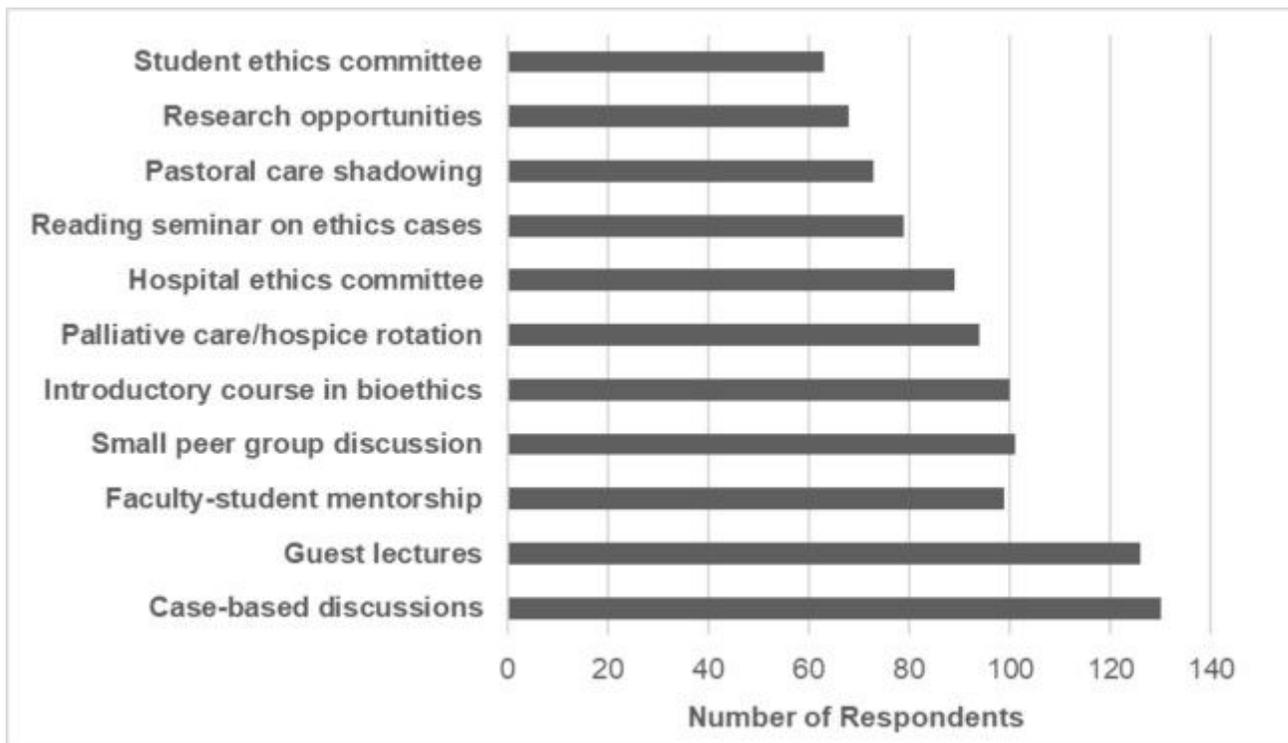


Figure 3

Educational components desired in graduate level ethics training across all educational programs (n=161)