

# Color Wars: Bringing Our Best into the Light to Improve Resident Morale and Burnout

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## Abstract

The medical education community has acknowledged physician burnout as an increasingly important issue to address during residency training and that the formation of habits and skills to cope with the demands of medicine is vital. Chief residents and program leadership in the University of Virginia Internal Medicine Residency Program identified a goal of improving resident morale and resiliency. Brainstorming sessions led to the shared opinion that:

- increased recognition of personal accomplishments, forming a program-wide culture of gratitude and spoken appreciation, as well as
- structured gatherings outside the hospital in team settings for friendly competition

could be beneficial in addressing burnout and increasing morale.

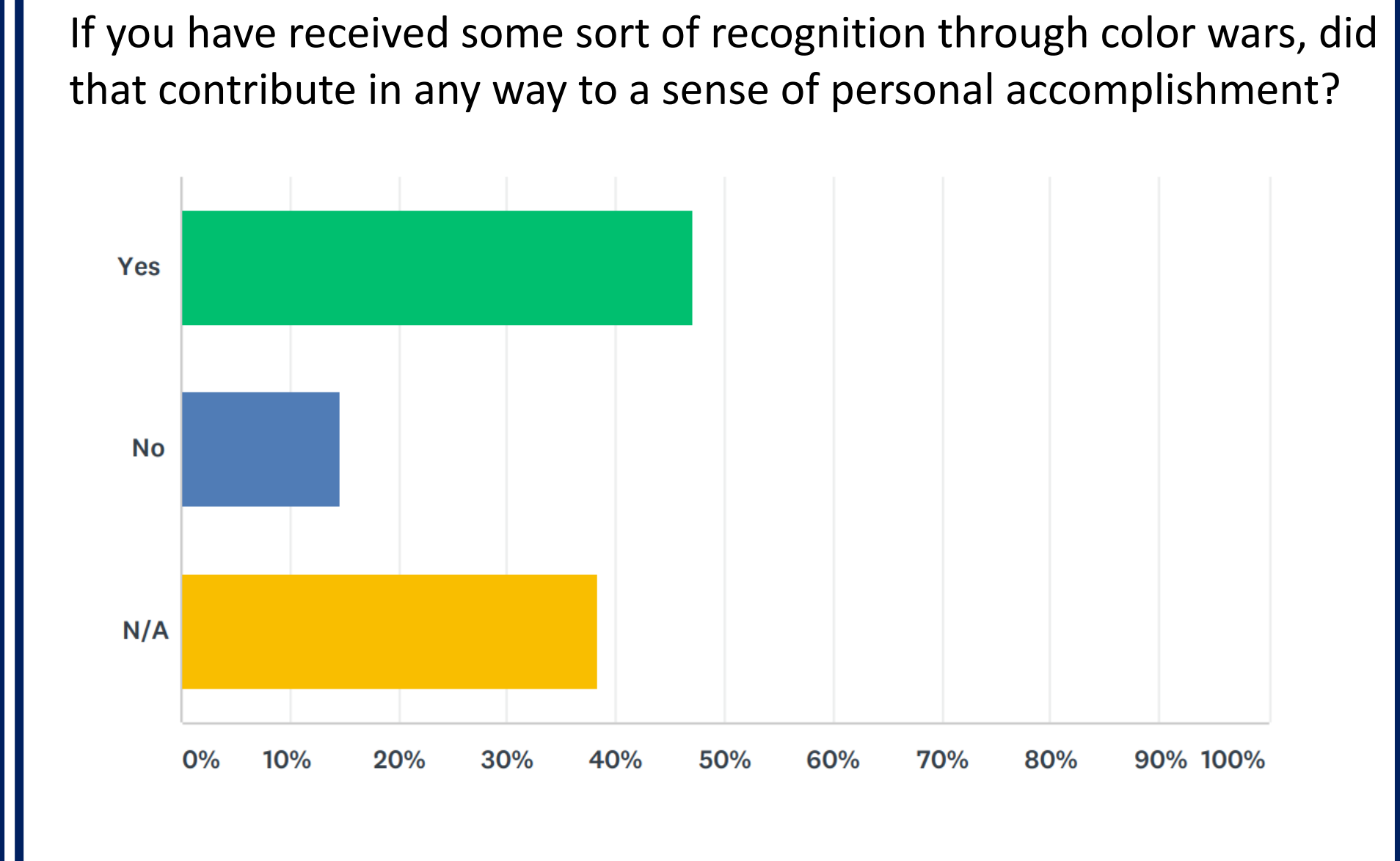
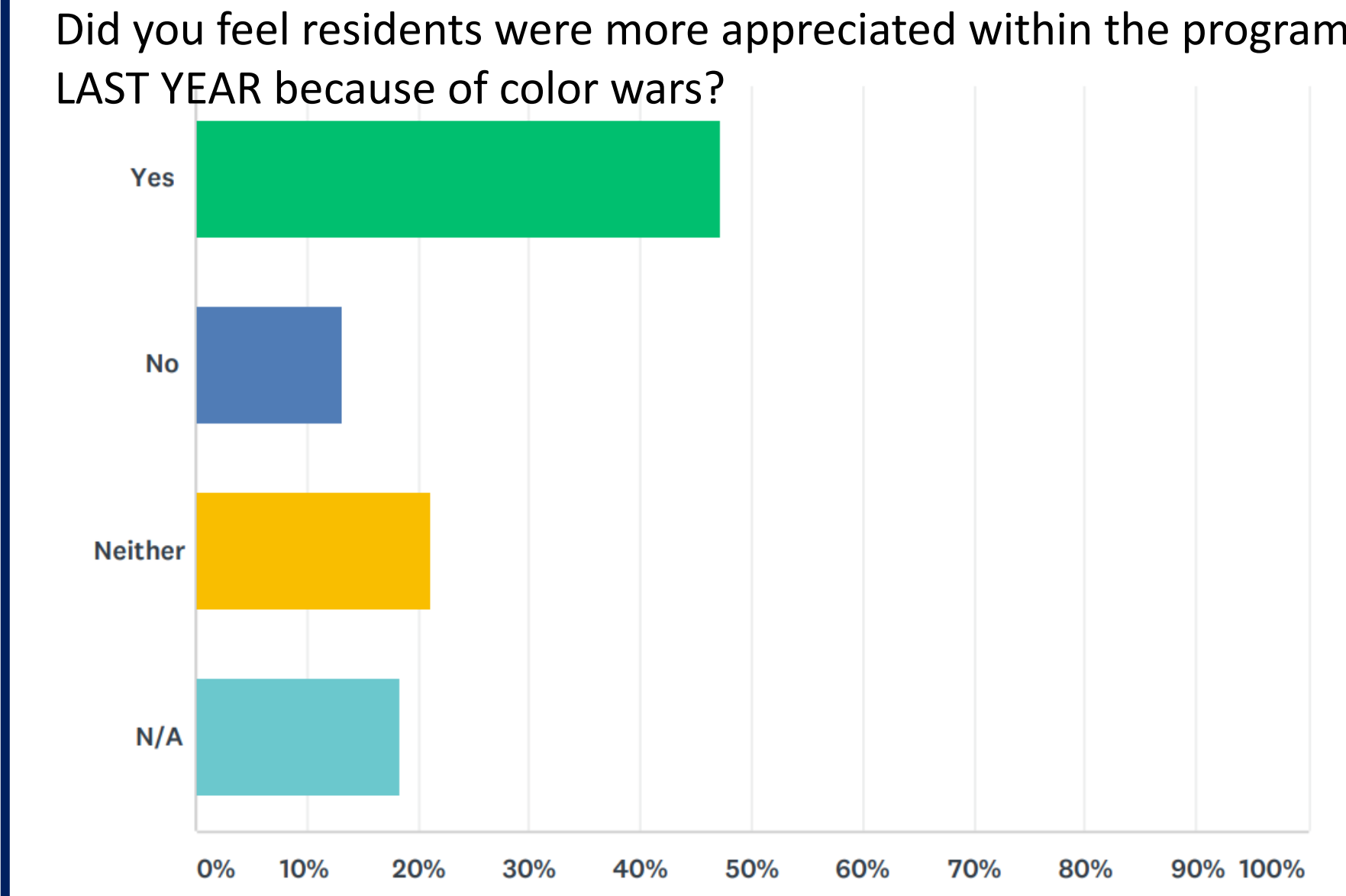
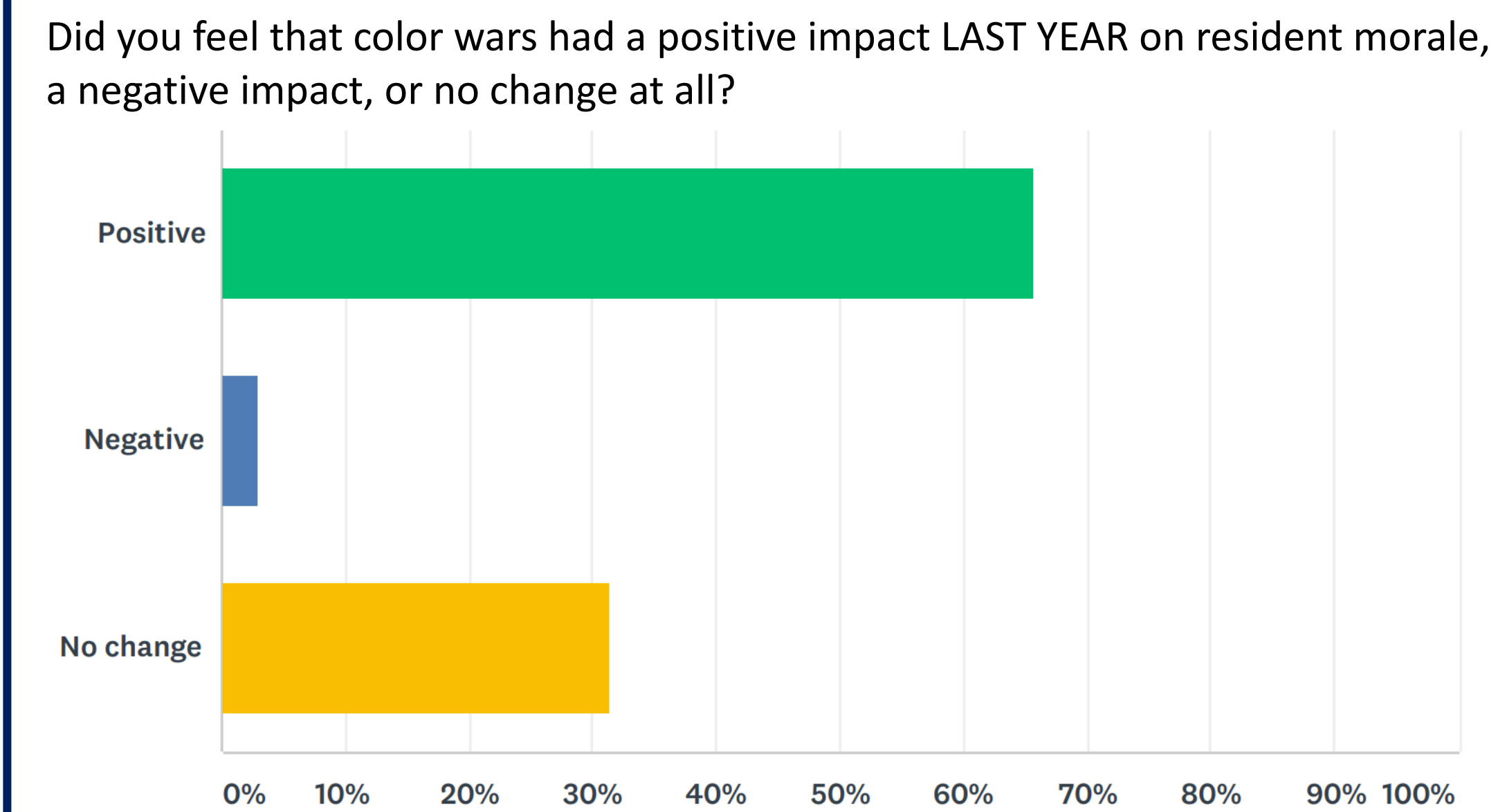
## Methods

Building off the 3+1 structure in the program, each of the four "+1" groups—previously labeled as one of four colors (red, blue, green or purple)—in the 2016-17 academic year were grouped as teams in a novel and innovative program competition called "Color Wars". In this structure, residents as individuals--as well as "+1 groups" as a team--were publicly acknowledged and awarded "points" on the basis of many often under-recognized accomplishments:

- Unsolicited praise from patients/nurses/faculty
- Publications and presentations
- Volunteerism at the medical school or in the community
- Conference attendance

Larger scale field day events or team-based photo competitions were held throughout the year in which +1 group had to gather and compete as teams. Accrual of points on a monthly basis led to individuals winning small prizes donated by the program or faculty (such as restaurant gift certificates). Each month, the "+1 group" with the highest cumulative points by its members was rewarded with a team breakfast shared on their academic half-day. Residents also underwent a didactic session in December 2016 as a "+1 group" containing discussion of the program's historical burnout data, a facilitated brainstorming session on combating burnout both as individuals and as a program, and a guided small group reflective writing exercise.

## Results



"Definitely recognition for one's accomplishments. This all too often is overlooked and a small **morale boost** to those who have worked hard is always rewarding"

What residents are saying

"the **sense of community** it engenders that crosses friend circles"

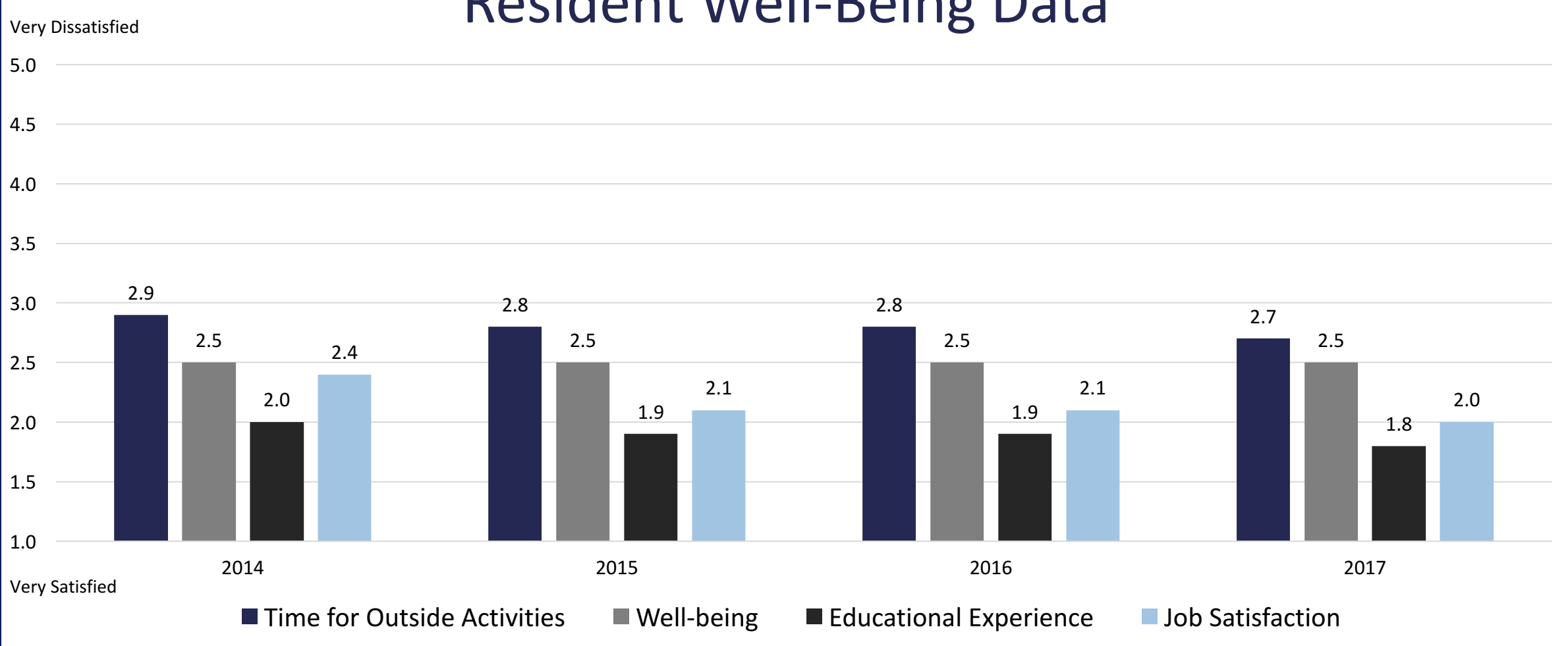
"...makes you aware of who is doing things "the right way" and at least in my case makes me more apt to observe those residents and see what I can do to **improve my own practice**"



"I really enjoyed doing the activities with fellow residents outside the hospital like field day and other **bonding** activities."



## Resident Well-Being Data



## Discussion

Qualitatively, in a survey reviewing the intervention, residents note subjective improvement in morale this past academic year extending into the present. Key program faculty report they are more likely to submit positive comments and observations about residents due to awareness of the program's structure of resident recognition. Subjectively, residents felt more appreciated and that the intervention contributed to a sense of personal accomplishment. Annual program burnout data collected in May 2017 did not show any program-wide change in burnout compared to previous years but there has been no clear trend in this data with prior curricular or duty hour changes. Positive trends continue to be seen over the last four years in time for outside activities, educational experience and job satisfaction. The program plans to try to enhance structured opportunities to bring residents together for reflection during the workday as well as time together outside the hospital and to continue to promote named appreciation of accomplishments and team-oriented activities.