

Wellbeing Partners: An Analysis of Trends in PA Student Depression Risk at Various Stages of Training

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Background:

Despite the knowledge that suicide rates among physicians are twice that of the general population and >50% of US medical students report burnout, few studies explore the wellbeing and mental health help-seeking behaviors of Physician Assistant (PA) students.^{1,2} This study aims to identify potential factors that influence students' risk of depression at different stages of training.

Description and Methods:

Didactic students in 7 PA programs were asked to participate in a survey at orientation and again 6 months later. Surveys included PHQ-9 screening, demographic and environmental questions, and questions related to mental health help-seeking behaviors. Overall response rates were 287/347 (82.3%) at orientation and 217/350 (62%) 6 months later at mid-point didactic year.

Results:

At orientation, 4.5% (13/287) of students had PHQ-9 scores >10 as compared to 18.9% (41/217) of students at mid-point. Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) increases were noted for each of the 9 PHQ-9 questions, including suicidal ideation which increased from 3.5% (10/287) to 7.4% (16/217). At both orientation and mid-point, students who admitted to participating regularly in counseling had significantly higher PHQ-9 scores than those who do not. At mid-point, but not orientation, those who had a major life event in the past 3 months ($p < 0.01$) and those who had considered dropping out of school in the past 6 months ($p < 0.01$) both had higher PHQ-9 scores.

Discussion:

Depression screening scores among PA students increased dramatically through the first year of training, far surpassing the general population US national average of 7.1% for depression.³ PA programs faculty have a responsibility to work towards providing training that promotes the development of wellbeing alongside the development of clinical acumen.

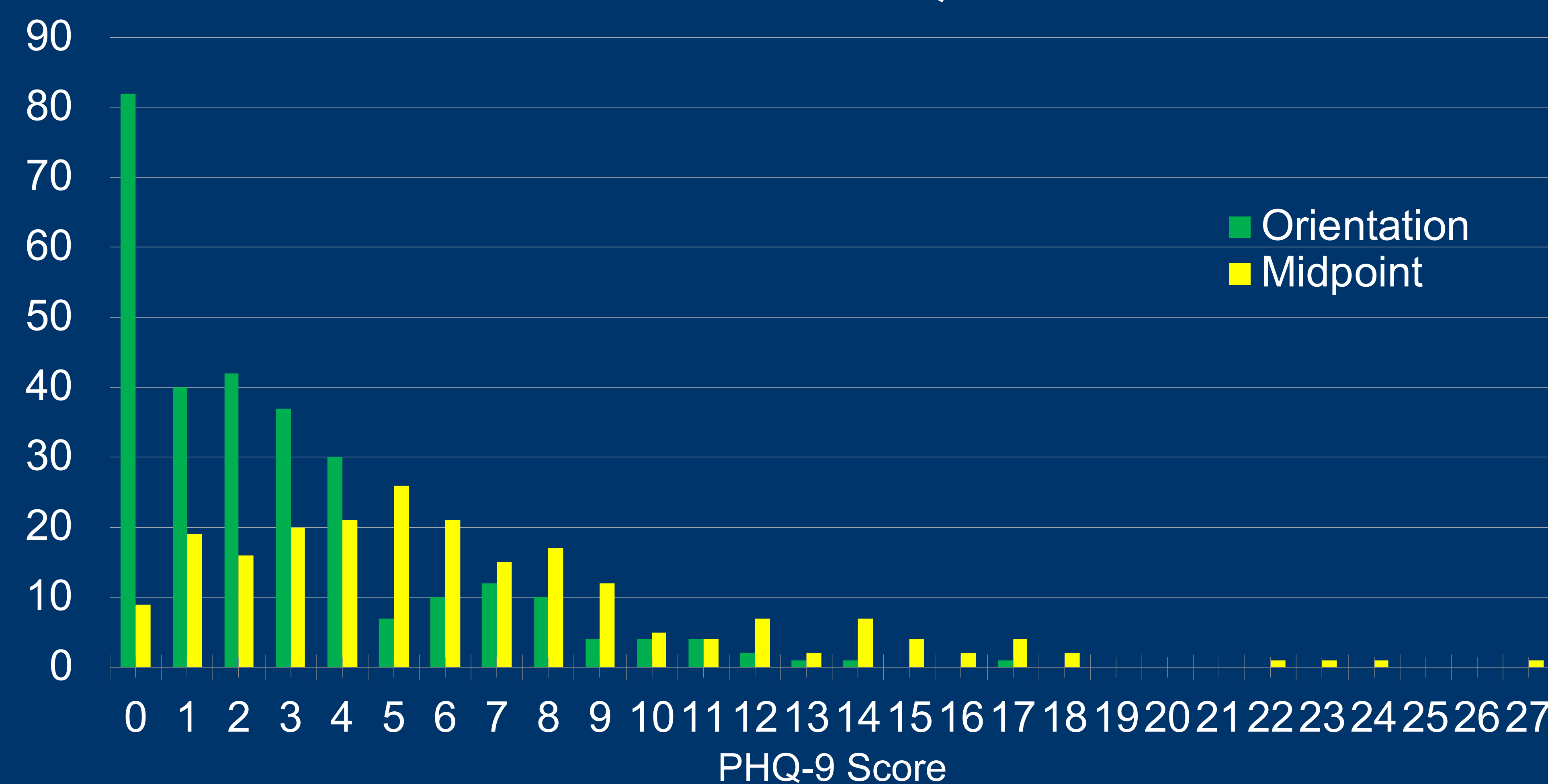
References

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2. Dyrbye LN, Massie FS, Eacker A, et al. Relationship between burnout and professional conduct and attitudes among US medical students. *JAMA*. 2010;304:11730-1180.
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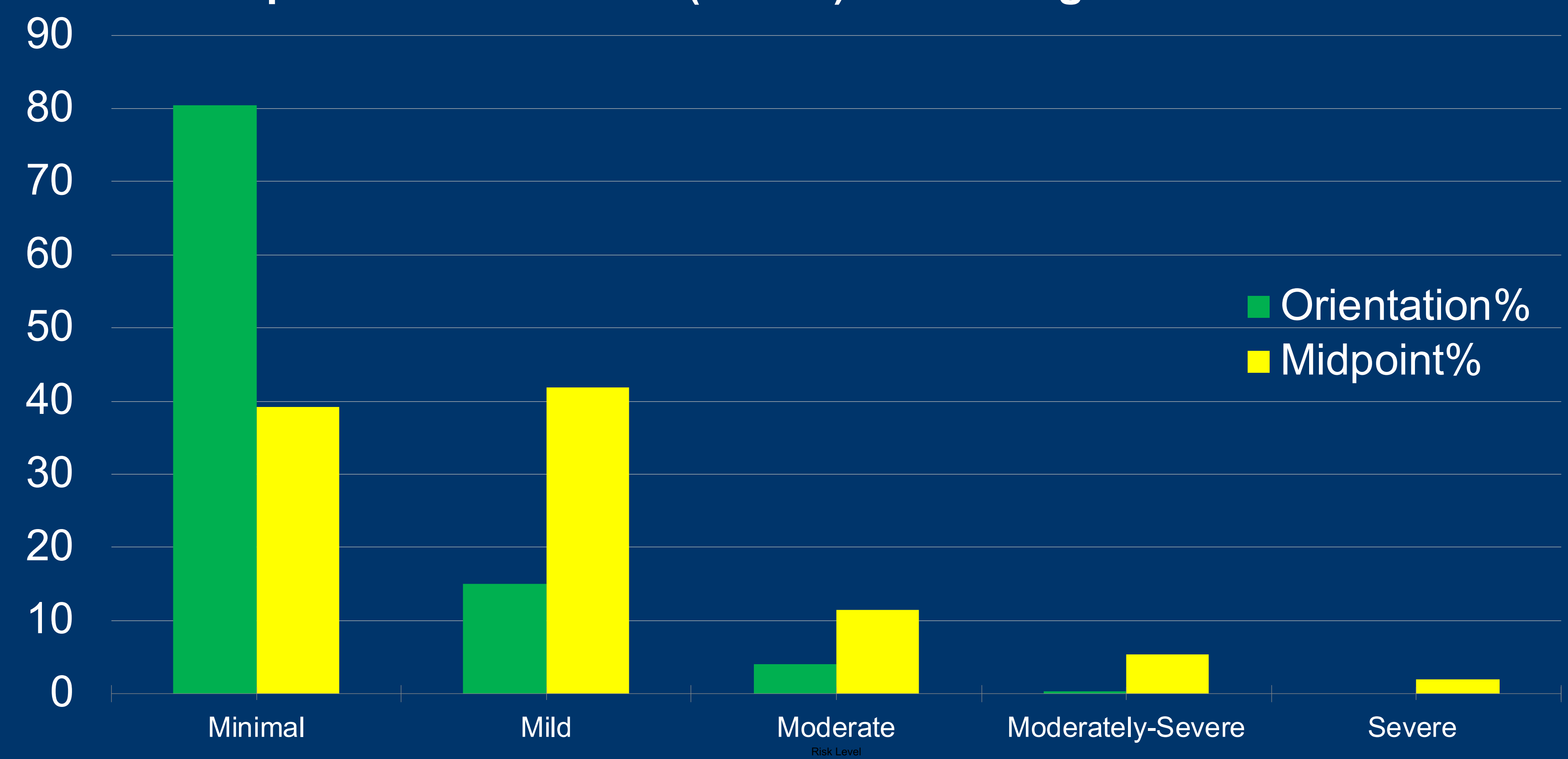
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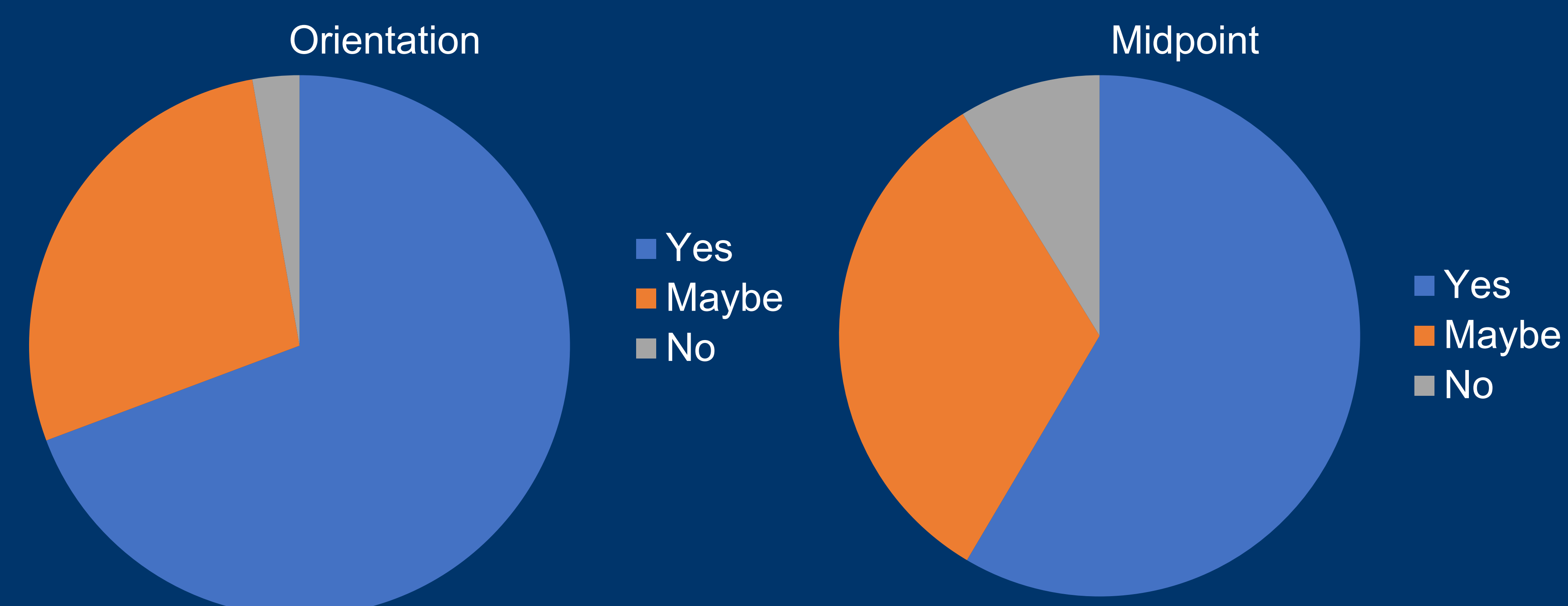
Distribution of PHQ-9 Scores



Depression Risk Level (PHQ-9): Percentage of Students



Do you think you would reach out for mental health help if you thought you needed it?



69% Yes

59% Yes