

Promoting Women in Academic Medicine during COVID-19 and Beyond



KEY WORDS: COVID-19; gender equity; diversity; virtual lecture.

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INTRODUCTION

Despite extensive work to improve gender equity in academic medicine, women lag in terms of promotions and leadership positions (1). This inequity intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic which has disproportionately affected women, particularly those at early-career stages, who have been bearing the load of additional caregiving and homeschooling responsibilities (2–4). National surveys of early career faculty also highlighted the devastating impact of the COVID-19-related travel ban and the resultant cancellations of meetings on their careers (5).

One reason for the lower promotion rates of women is impediments to travel for national and international presentations, which are associated with opportunities for networking and collaborations, critical to academic promotion and success (6). Due to the COVID-19-related travel bans, most grand rounds and visiting professorships are now being conducted virtually which has removed barriers to travel and provides an opportunity to involve more women in visiting professorships.

The Center for Faculty Development at the Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) designed a program to promote women faculty and postdoctoral fellows during COVID-19 by providing the opportunity to serve as virtual visiting scholar at national or international institutions combined with mentorship, coaching, and peer-to-peer networking. In this report, we describe the design and short-term outcomes of this program.

METHODS

The Anne Klibanski Visiting Scholar Program was established in July 2020 with the goal to identify women faculty and postdoctoral fellows disproportionately affected by COVID-19, and who would benefit from national or international speaking, mentoring, and networking opportunities. The review committee consisted of senior members from different

departments who were tasked to identify opportunities for a visiting lecture in their field and served as sponsors.

A Visiting Lecture Series was created to support and advance the careers of women faculty at MGH, the US, and abroad. These lectures bring together faculty members from outside institutions and MGH on topics that overlap both research areas with the intent to build relationships and advance science across institutional, national, and international borders.

All scholars participated in two individual coaching sessions with a professional leadership coach and were enrolled in a 6-week small-group leadership coaching program focusing on career development and community building. The coaching program covered topics such as imposter syndrome, identifying sponsors, finding and leveraging opportunities, networking, and development of a national reputation. Scholars were encouraged to continue to meet and network after completion of the program.

Selected scholars completed a survey on the impact of the program and answers were compared using the chi-square test. This study was exempt by our institutional review board.

RESULTS

From 74 applications, we selected 36 scholars for the program (Table 1). All requests to outside institutions to host our scholars were accepted and scholars gave 32 national and 18 international talks. The experience of the scholars was consistently positive and led to new collaborations. In fact, many institutions wanted to implement a similar program, which led to the creation of the Visiting Lecture Series, for which we invited 8 national and 5 international women speakers who were paired with our scholars for joint lectures.

Since the beginning of the program, more than one-third of scholars have been considered for promotion to Assistant or Associate Professor, two received major institutional leadership positions, one a tenure track position, and five received other awards.

The survey response rate was 94%. There was a significant increase ($p < 0.05$) in the number of scholars who agreed or strongly agreed that by implementing the award, MGH created an environment that promotes a culture of mentorship and visibility, increases knowledge of available institutional

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Table 1 Demographics of the 36 Selected Anne Klibanski Scholars

Degree	Postdoctoral fellow	Instructor	Assistant professor	Associate professor
MD		2	17	5
PhD	3	1	4	2
MD, PhD			2	
Department				
Anesthesia				
Dermatology				
Emergency service				
Medicine				
Cancer center				
Neurology				
Ophthalmology				
Orthopedics				
Pathology				
Pediatric surgery				
Psychiatry				
Radiation oncology				
Radiology				
Surgery				

information and resources, and proves that MGH is open to change (Table 2).

DISCUSSION

Our study showed that the implementation of a virtual visiting scholar program positively influenced women’s careers by providing them the chance to build a national/international reputation to support their promotion. Given the significant institutional financial constraints due to the

pandemic, this initiative presented an innovative low-cost way to support women faculty and trainees, researchers, and clinicians, during a challenging time. In times of crisis, the opportunity to connect with other institutions without barriers and advance their careers as well as to form small communities, equipped the women with a network that will keep expanding and a sounding board that will resonate.

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Declarations:

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that they do not have a conflict of interest.

Table 2 Program Feedback Survey Administered Prior To and 9 Months After Start of the Program

	AK Visiting Scholar Pre-Program Survey						p value
	Strongly agree/agree	Neither disagree nor agree	Disagree /strongly disagree	Strongly agree/agree	Neither disagree nor agree	Disagree /strongly disagree	
Environment that promotes a culture of mentorship	51.61%	12.90%	35.48%	75.76%	9.09%	15.15%	0.0459
Environment that promotes feedback and sharing of information	48.39%	25.81%	25.81%	66.67%	15.15%	18.18%	0.142
Environment that promotes visibility	38.71%	22.58%	38.71%	63.64%	24.24%	12.12%	0.0478
Environment that provides actionable advice and guidance	45.16%	22.58%	32.26%	60.61%	24.24%	15.15%	0.2194
Knowledge of available institutional information	41.94%	41.94%	16.13%	75.76%	15.15%	9.09%	0.0063
Knowledge of how to access institutional resources	41.94%	38.71%	19.35%	75.76%	12.12%	12.12%	0.0063
Someone to turn to in case of difficulty	67.74%	9.68%	22.58%	84.85%	6.06%	9.09%	0.1091
Faculty feel they are part of a close-knit team.	41.94%	29.03%	29.03%	60.61%	27.27%	12.12%	0.1384
Faculty share information.	45.16%	41.94%	12.90%	66.67%	18.18%	15.15%	0.0854
Faculty strive to support each other.	51.61%	22.58%	25.81%	57.58%	27.27%	15.15%	0.6343
Your work is consistent with your expectations.	61.29%	22.58%	16.13%	69.70%	24.24%	6.06%	0.4824
MGH is open to change.	38.71%	35.48%	25.81%	69.70%	12.12%	18.18%	0.0135

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